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BY DEANA JAMES

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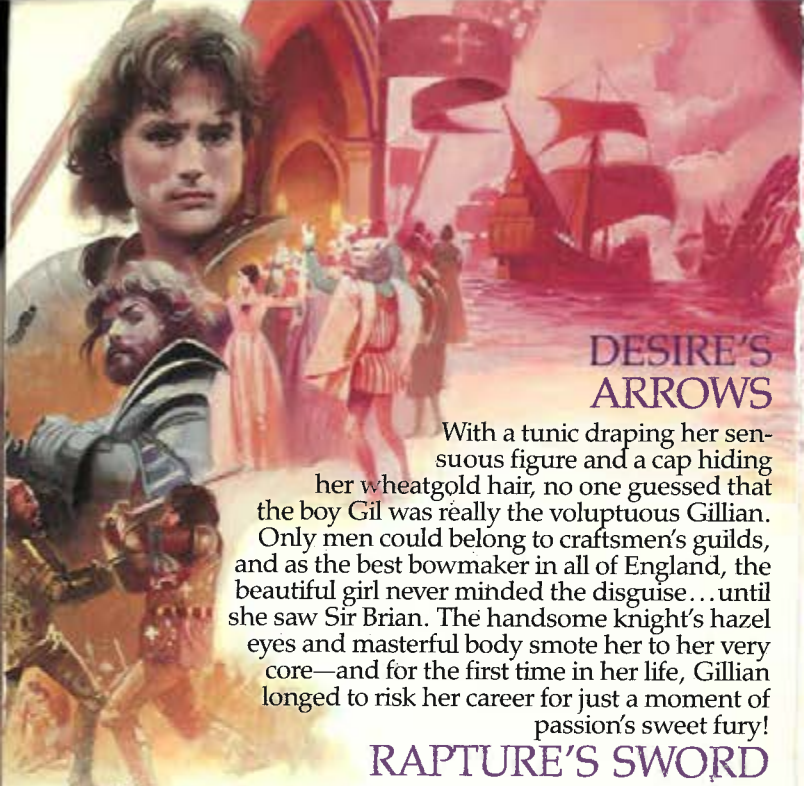
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## DESIRE'S ARROWS

With a tunic draping her sensuous figure and a cap hiding her wheatgold hair, no one guessed that the boy Gil was really the voluptuous Gillian. Only men could belong to craftsmen's guilds, and as the best bowmaker in all of England, the beautiful girl never minded the disguise...until she saw Sir Brian. The handsome knight's hazel eyes and masterful body smote her to her very core—and for the first time in her life, Gillian longed to risk her career for just a moment of passion's sweet fury!

## RAPTURE'S SWORD

When Brian de Trenanay discovered the gorgeous maiden beneath the coarse, mannish garments, he knew he had to brand her as his own. Even though she was an enemy Englishwoman, she had pierced the French man of war to the heart. His senses enflamed, Brian decided there would be time enough for fighting on the morrow. Tonight he would surrender his strength to the power of ecstasy and submit to the irresistible force of her

# LOVESPELL



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## PASSION'S DISCOVERY

"You still have not learned your lesson," Brian gritted. Before she could move to escape him, he had gripped her shoulder. "How old are you?" he demanded. With his other hand, he flipped up the hem of her scarlet smock. His fingers hooked in the edge of the breastbinder and snagged it downward. Ignoring Gillian's cry of rage, he stared at the full shapely mounds that burst free.

Twisting fearfully in his grasp, Gillian sought ineffectually to cover herself from his appraisal.

"No girl, surely," he muttered as he beheld her pale smooth skin that seemed too velvety to be real. Even as he gazed, heated blood surged through his body. As one mesmerized, he put out his hand, his fingers trembling slightly.

Her body was all too real. Beneath his fingertips the warm flesh pulsed. His eyes flew to her agonized face. Her lips parted as she gasped for air. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Oh, no."

"Beautiful," the knight sighed. The harsh man who coldly sought to inspect her body because he was accustomed to being obeyed was gone. He could not even remember why he had taken her again in his arms. He only knew the beauty of her body.

Beyond resistance, Gillian found herself responding wildly to his nearness and moaned slightly. Her pliancy acted as a command to him. His free hand smoothed the folds of the smock back over her shoulders baring her to the waist . . .

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## *Chapter One*

Sir Brian de Trenanay lurched from the saddle of his destrier and stumbled blindly to the foot of a tree. Where his hand clutched it, the rough bark was stained red with blood. The slash below the ribs on his left side had opened despite the surgeon's stitching. Cursing flatly between clenched teeth, he lowered himself heavily to the ground. The shades of foliage in the York landscape blended into one acid green as he set his teeth and stared dizzily around him.

Damn that Saxon squire!

The coarse wool of his tunic absorbed the blood in an ever-widening circular stain. With shaking fingers Brian unbuckled the heavy leather belt around his lean hips and let it slip to the ground. Fumbling the edge of the garment upward, he exposed the jagged wound across his flank.

He cursed again as he pleated the material into a triple thickness and pressed it tightly against the wound. The foul words ended in an agonized groan. With leaden fingers he pulled the belt together across his lean middle and buckled it tightly.

The effort plus the pain caused by the compression of the swollen wound turned the world around him into a hazy, swirling fog. His head lolled back against the tree; his eyes closed.

The destrier continued to crop the lush grass beside the road. The grinding of its teeth and the occasional jingle of its bridle as the horse tore a particularly stubborn clump free were the only sounds in the quiet afternoon.

A bird trilled in the branches over the knight's head. A slight breeze rustled the leaves and fanned the lock of sandy blond hair plastered to the high fair forehead by the cold sweat of agony. Whether the sound or the coolness or both aroused the man from stupor, he was not to know. Hazel eyes, amber flecked with a fierce jade green, stared upward, unfocused, at the fluttering leaves. Gradually his senses returned. Weakly raising his head, he stared around him.

Grim lines of disgust and pain settled deeper into his sun-darkened skin. He was, by his own estimation, too weak to continue. He closed his eyes allowing his head to fall forward onto his chest as he exhaled the breath from his lungs in a deep sigh.

Damn! And damn again!

Damn the plague in this cursed country that had taken the life of the best squire and companion a man could ever hope to have. And damn the filthy thieving blackguard loaned him by that English knight. The swine must be laughing himself sick somewhere.

Pressing a hand tight against his side, he sought to lever himself up. The view of the landscape was suddenly obscured by dancing black spots. Sweat broke out on his forehead. At that moment he was too weak to rise. Grimly, he rested, head dropped back against the rough bark, gathering strength and will from deep reserves.

Raising his stained right hand in front of his face, he watched it tremble. His mouth curled in disgust. His temper had gotten the better of him again as it had so many times in the past. Hopefully, he looked around him, searching for some source of help.

The dastardly theft of his hauberk, plate, and weapons had so infuriated him that he had ridden at full gallop away from the rude hospital set up adjacent to the lists at Harrogate. No thieving churl in league with some English swine would make off with his armor.

He shook his head. Now miles from anywhere on a strange road, little-used by the look of it, his situation began to grow serious. Gathering his feet under him, he pushed his back against the trunk of the tree, hunching himself up until he stood panting, his legs quivering beneath his weight, his hand pressed firmly against his side, the blood seeping through his fingers.

"Ho, son." The knight's voice was a shallow tremor of its former self.

The destrier threw up its head at the unaccustomed sound from the man. Used to harsh explosive commands accompanied most frequently by the jab of a spur, it stared puzzled as if at a stranger.

Brian extended a blood-stained hand trembling with weakness. At the same time he took a lurching step away from the tree. One followed the other as he wove a twisted way toward his horse. The animal shook its bridle, snorting warily. The smell of blood did not alarm

it. A battle-trained warhorse, its flanks and chest were frequently splattered with red. But the man's grab for the trailing rein was another matter. Part of its training had been to trample men on foot, especially those who came at its head to grab the bridle. Although the man on the ground was familiar, the destrier could not abandon its training, hard-learned with painful pricks from the point of a dagger on its neck. Puzzled, it shook its head up and down and backed nervously.

"Ho, son," the knight gasped again. "Damnation . . ." The destrier wheeled away and lumbered several yards down the road. Dust rose in a brown swirl drifting around the man's legs. He could taste it in his mouth as he clamped his teeth against his disappointment. The sky whirled. His knees buckled. He dropped down in the dust. A sharp stone cut his knee through his woolen chausses. The pain roused him for an instant, drawing a groaning curse from his lips before he pitched forward on his face in the road.

"Gil!" A young voice pierced the veil. "Go not near him. You cannot trust him. He may be a thief."

"What have we to steal, Kenneth?"

The older voice, preceded by an amused chuckle, carried a note of maturity and authority, yet it, too, had a high boyish quality. Strong hands touched Brian's shoulders, clutched, sought to turn him over. The twisting of his torso wrung an agonized cry from his mouth.

"Oh, poor man." The soft voice crooned in his ear. "Where are you hurt?" The youth's breath brushed his cheek.

"Side," Brian croaked. His nose was full of dust from the roadbed. His tongue felt swollen in his parched mouth. He licked his lips in an effort to produce speech. "On . . . left . . . Careful!" This last was hissed in agony.

"Yes. I see. Kenneth, help me turn him gently. Gently, now!" The voice reassured Brian through the haze of dust and pain.

Four hands fastened on his body along its left side carefully avoiding the area over his hipbone as they rolled him onto his back. When he opened his eyes, he stared upward into a pair of young concerned faces, obviously those of a pair of brothers.

"How did you get here?" the older youth asked. "Were you attacked and robbed?"

"If he had been robbed, his horse would be gone, Gil." The younger brother jeered importantly, visibly preening himself at having scored off the elder.

"I was robbed all right," Brian interjected hoarsely, "by my own squire."

"Poor man," the one called Gil murmured again, his fingers patting Brian's shoulder comfortingly. "And you were wounded in the encounter. Where are your friends?"

The knight's eyes closed for a minute as a sudden twinge, not altogether physical, pierced him. "No friends. Not in this cursed land," he whispered.

"Poor man." The youth's hand lifted to brush the dusty hair back from the pain-lined forehead. "Where is your home? We can take you to it."

The question elicited a weak snarl, as Brian's head rolled weakly in the dust. "Not likely you and your brother would be traveling so far as France."

"A Frenchman," the younger lad sneered, "and a knight, too, by the look of that warhorse. Best be moving on. His kind can take care of themselves, or not. He might not have any friends; but if some of his own were to ride by here, they would not take kindly to us bending over him like this."



"Nonsense. He is hurt."

"No." Kenneth rose impatiently. "Come on, Gil."

"Please . . ." With failing sense the knight fumbled for the hand that rested warm on his thigh. Closing over the slender wrist, he held on tightly, fearful that they might run away and leave him. "Please . . . will repay."

"Not necessary." The youth's dark eyes were soft with sympathy. "I will stay with you while Kenneth goes for the cart."

"Yes. All right." Brian's eyes closed in relief, but his grip on the slender wrist never relaxed.

"I hate to hear Uncle Tobin when I tell him," Kenneth objected.

"Go on. This poor man will bleed to death while you make excuses," Gil ordered. The unimprisoned hand stroked back the filthy hair again and brushed dust from around the slightly twisted mouth.

With an exclamation of disgust, Kenneth swung away, his footsteps retreating on the dusty road.

When they were alone, Brian spoke again, his eyes closed against the light and pain. "Good of you . . ."

The youth's soft voice murmured something in reply, but the knight did not catch it as he lapsed again into unconsciousness.

Drawn by a complaisant brown mare, the cart creaked down the road. Perched on its pile of fresh yew staves, Kenneth directed the driver toward the pair. "I told Gil to come away, Uncle Tobin," the boy insisted for the fifth time.

"Gil, what have you got there?" the driver growled through a grizzled curly beard.

"A wounded man, Uncle Tobin." Gil sought to pry

open the knight's fingers.

"Well, let him go and come away. He is naught to our business."

With a strangled moan, Brian came awake refusing to release his grasp. "No, help me. I will repay you." He coughed weakly as he raised his head from the dust. His hazel eyes swung hazily from Gil's face to the faces of the others, Kenneth and the older, bearded man called Uncle Tobin. Sweat beaded the wounded man's forehead as he sought to raise himself still further. "Sir Brian de Trenanay," he introduced himself, his lips curving in a pained travesty of an ingratiating smile.

"Tobin Walton," the older man replied coldly, his expression stony.

Brian's head slipped back into the dust. Discouraged, he closed his eyes for an instant. "If you will help me to mount my horse . . ." He sighed. "I shall be forever grateful."

"Uncle Tobin," Gil's young voice objected strongly, "he is too weak to hold up his head. How can he be put on a horse?"

At this slur on his strength, Brian grunted in protest. Hoisting himself up on his right elbow, he turned his body half over, dragging Gil's wrist with him. "Strong enough to ride . . ." he insisted, shaking his head to throw off encroaching dizziness. His lips clamped down hard as fresh blood welled from beneath the padded tunic onto Gil's hand.

Ignoring the wounded man's weak demonstration, Gil's eyes met the carter's. "We can help him onto the cart and take him back to York Minster with us. Come, Kenneth, hop down and lend a shoulder. Can you get your knees drawn up?" This was spoken to the knight who swayed dizzily.

"Yes," he nodded. "Jus' help me mount m' horse. . . ."

"Nonsense." A strong young shoulder wormed its way under the knight's armpit. "Put your arm around me. Kenneth!"

The smaller youth stuffed himself under the right side.

"Ready?" Gil asked. All three faces were very close together. Their eyes met.

Brian drew in a ragged breath. "Ready." He clasped each shoulder as tightly as his fading strength would allow.

"Heave!"

Accompanied by a wrenching groan, the three staggered upright and Brian's body was tipped backward onto the cart.

"Catch up his horse, Kenneth," Gil called. "Go, Uncle Tobin. The man is bleeding badly."

What Uncle Tobin's comment might have been was lost on Brian, who swooned away, even before his head rattled among the hard yew staves loaded loosely in the cart's bed. His long legs hung over the edge of the two-wheeled conveyance that swayed drunkenly from side to side as the driver turned the brown mare's head around and headed back the way he had come.

For the first time since the episode had begun, Kenneth's face broke into a grin as he approached the huge destrier. Talking soothingly, he grasped the trailing rein and patted its velvety nose.

In the cart Gil had taken the knight's head on her lap and was cushioning him against the jolts and bumps of the rough road. But Brian was insensible to everything now. His stained hands relaxed limply, palms upward; his booted feet trailed ingloriously in the dust.

## *Chapter Two*

Gillian Fletcher tossed the long braids of wheat gold hair back over her shoulders with practiced movements of her head. Her strong fingers never faltered as she pressed firmly against the edges of the wound on the knight's side. Eyes bright with concern, she stared into the dirty sweat-streaked face of the unconscious man.

"He was poorly stitched," Tobin grunted slightly as he jabbed hard to force the point of the curved needle through the underside of the resilient flesh. It was a big needle used for sewing pieces of leather together to fashion into quivers. "Whoever did the work was careless and unskilled."

From the deep well of unconsciousness, Brian jerked upward. "'Ware my flank, you whoreson!" His hazel eyes flew open searching for the source of the pain. His arms flailed wildly, one muscular forearm narrowly

missing Gillian's head in its swift arc.

"Hush, Sir Knight," she whispered, her mouth close to his ear as she ducked. "Uncle Tobin, you hurt him sorely."

Grunting again, Tobin cut the knot he had tied and moved over half an inch to jab with needle again. A sardonic grin twitched the corners of his mouth upward for only an instant. "Just like most of these fellows," he averred between clenched teeth. "Brave and full of loud boasts before their senseless tournaments, but they howl loudest of all when the wounds open up." Tobin's brown eyes narrowed as he concentrated on the task at hand.

The knight stilled his thrashing, his eyes searching the face hovering over him. Brown velvet eyes in a sun-gilded face held his own. The soft mouth parted in a murmur of sympathy. "Where? . . ." His eyes flickered from her face to sweep the room. "Gil?" He sought a friendly face rather desperately.

The girl's eyes flicked to Tobin's. "He is around somewhere," the older man replied. "He has work to do . . . he and Kenneth."

Wincing as Tobin's needle dipped, Brian drew a shuddering breath. "Gil helped me," he gritted between clenched teeth. His thoughts swung dizzily as the ever-increasing pain made consistent thought almost impossible. Never in his life had anything hurt him so much. He sought to concentrate. "Repay," he gasped at last. "I will repay you all." He tried to catch Tobin's eye, but the man merely grunted. Brian's face was white to the lips. Sweat drenched his face and body. His reserves of strength were fast fading. In agony at the stitching, he forced his shoulders and head off the pallet on which he lay. To his horror the ordeal had just begun. He had

regained consciousness at the first jab.

Aware of the barely suppressed sounds of agony and the quivering of the flesh beneath his hands, Tobin cocked an eye toward the wounded man's face. "Mayhap if my niece would bring you a dram of ale, 'twould make the process easier to bear."

Swallowing hard, Brian nodded. "Please."

Carefully the brown-eyed girl lowered his shoulders. As she hurried away, a raw intake of breath was followed by a hoarse curse of agony.

Back at his side in a couple of minutes, Gillian found him broken, his fists clutching up handfuls of the pallet as he gnawed at his lip until the blood came.

"Here, poor man," her soft voice penetrated the terrible agony. She slipped her arm under his neck as she raised the tankard to his lips.

He drank greedily, swilling the mild alcoholic drink down his throat, willing it to numb his torn, pierced flesh. In one long gulp he consumed the bitter liquid. Then like a sick child he turned his sweating face into her breast.

Gillian wiped the wet hair from his forehead as Tobin jabbed again. An agonized shriek broke from his lips. He drove his mouth hard against the upper slope of her breast, his teeth bruising her in the violence of his pain.

His long body went limp.

Startled, fearful, she raised her eyes to Tobin, a question bright in their smoky depths.

"Passed out," the man replied phlegmatically. "Better for him. He is somewhat braver than most. I give him that."

"He is a brave man," Gillian insisted. "You hurt him sorely, Uncle Tobin. You could have used a



smaller needle."

"I have not a smaller needle with the proper curve." Tobin grimaced as he jabbed again.

Even unconscious the knight's body jerked involuntarily. Gillian bit her lip as she felt the convulsive twitch along every nerve of her own body. His fevered breath burned hot against the tender skin of her breast. Peculiar sensations unique to her experience aroused a slight trembling in her hands and a singular tightening in her stomach. She slowly bent her head over his. Her lips brushed ever so slightly against his hair.

Brian regained consciousness in an unfamiliar room. His eyes focused upward on the thatch bound expertly across smoky beams. He remembered every hideous detail of the ordeal. His hand moved slowly, experimentally to touch his side, pleased that no more than a dull throbbing troubled him. He could bear that. That was child's play compared to Tobin's stitchery.

His eyes wandered across the ceiling and down the wattled whitewashed wall. A workbench occupied the entire center, an array of tools neatly arranged on hooks above it. Beneath and beside it were baskets containing staves of wood and other things beyond the line of his vision. He was obviously in a workshop of some kind. He grimaced slightly in distaste. Undoubtedly, Tobin, as well as Gil and Kenneth, were craftsmen of some kind. Grateful though he was for their care of him, he could not trust or like them.

As his body became more aware of its needs, he became aware of raging thirst. Likewise his belly felt painfully empty. He licked his cracked lips, finding them painful

and bruised. His mouth was so dry that he could hardly summon up enough moisture to wet them.

A sound caught his ear. He turned his head to find its source. A charcoal brazier glowed warmly beside his shoulder. Beyond that a seated figure was outlined in the light streaming through the open doorway.

Swallowing hard, Brian managed an indistinguishable croak.

The figure instantly responded. Laying down the work in hand, he came to the knight's side. "You are awake at last."

"Gil." Brian's voice was a dry whisper.

The youth sank to his knees. From a stool beside the brazier he poured ale from a pitcher into a leather tankard. A strong hand slipped beneath the man's neck lifting him and holding the drink to his lips. "Do not drink so fast. There is plenty."

Thirst satisfied, Brian sank back onto the pallet. "Thank you. I cannot remember being so dry." His voice surprised him by its weakness.

Gil's hand went immediately to his patient's forehead. "You have had a fever now for three days," he said seriously. "'Tis not surprising that you should be thirsty."

"Three days," Brian moaned. "Damn! Oh, damn!" His curse, uttered in a low whisper, was nevertheless intense and fervent. He sought to sit up, driving a wrenching pain through his side as he did so.

"You must lie still!" his nurse exclaimed, pushing his shoulders firmly back onto the pallet.

"I must get up," the knight contradicted. "The man I was using for a squire stole my armor while I was being stitched up in the surgeon's tent. He has sold it and left the country by now."

"Could he do that?" Gil asked. "Surely not. No other knight could use it. You fellows have your arms painted all over everything, do you not? No other knight could use your shield or armor." He patted the knight's shoulder soothingly. "He probably could not sell it."

A sneer curled Brian's lip. "My hauberk and plate did not have anything on them," he told the youth disgustedly.

"But are knights not the most honorable of men? What about their code of chivalry which I have heard much about?"

Brian flung an arm across his eyes. "Even if no knight would buy my armor, an English armorer would be happy to get the equipment. No questions asked." The full measure of the disaster made him weak to contemplate it. His hauberk alone had cost a small fortune, spent in palmier days. The replacement cost of it made him reel.

Beside him Gil set the tankard back on the stool. "I will fetch you some food," he suggested soothingly. "Things always look bad on an empty stomach. An honest English craftsman would not buy stolen goods, so take heart."

Brian allowed his arm to drop back limply. A rueful smile twitched across his lips. "Even if every craftsman between here and the channel were honest as your Saint George, he still would buy that armor. After all, he does not have to know that it was stolen. That damned thief would tell that I was dead and he had a right to sell the armor."

Gil's dark eyes were soft with sympathy as he regarded his patient helplessly.

With a heartfelt sigh Brian closed his eyes. "I suppose I could eat something," he agreed.

Only a very few minutes had passed before Gil was

back beside him bearing a tray. Brian's nostrils twitched as the delectable odor of meat and spices combined wafted toward him. When he opened his eyes, he beheld both boys, the older kneeling beside him as before, the younger leaning over his pallet on the other side.

Setting the tray down beside the pallet, Gil motioned to Kenneth. "We are going to raise you up and slip a bolster under your back," he told Brian. "Do not be alarmed. We will be very gentle and careful."

"Nonsense." The knight shook his head resentfully. "I can sit up by myself. I am not a babe."

His efforts to prove his statement were cut short as Gil flashed a look at Kenneth. The boy scurried away to the dimness of the shop behind Brian's head. At the same time Gil leaned forward, sliding both hands under the knight's armpits. His weight already in the youth's hands, Brian grasped the slender forearms telling himself that he was at least distributing it somewhat. Without an effort on his part, he was lifted into a half-reclining position. At the same time a bolster was shoved under his shoulders. Only a slight twinge from his left side accompanied the process.

"You can go now, Kenneth. Thank you," Gil said, reaching for a cloth on the tray. With a nod the boy left. Gil settled himself more comfortably on his knees and took one of Brian's hands in his own. The cloth was moist and warm. Deftly, Gil laved first one hand and then the other noting as he did so the strength in them as well as the crisscrossing of white scars on the back of the right hand.

"Why do you do this for me?" Brian asked suspiciously. "I vaguely remember a woman at my side the night that your uncle in his great kindness operated on

my side."

The youth stirred restively, his eyes downcast at his task. "Oh, you mean Gillian, my sister?"

"Yes," prompted Brian. "I suppose so."

Completing his washing, the youth folded the cloth neatly and laid it on the tray. Without answering, he picked up the bowl and spoon.

"I can feed myself," Brian objected although in truth he felt decidedly light-headed. A pallor underlay his skin and a fine film of perspiration bedewed his forehead and upper lip.

"If I feed you, you will be able to eat much more," Gil observed quietly, dipping the spoon into the steaming bowl. "Also, the soup is very hot. If you should begin to tremble and spill some, you could get a bad scald." The youth smiled sympathetically as he extended the spoon toward the man's mouth.

With a sigh and a roll of his eyes heavenward, Brian submitted. As he realized later, Gil's words had been truthful. After only a few bites, the dizzying weakness overcame him so that his head lolled back against the bolster. He was only dimly aware when Gil set down the bowl and slipped the backrest out from under his shoulders.

When he awoke, the shop was dark except for the glow from the charcoal brazier. With a weak sigh, Brian moved restively to ease a cramp in his leg.

"So you are awake," Kenneth's voice spoke from the darkness. "Wait while I fetch Gil."

The knight's voice stopped him. "Where is Gil?"

"At supper," came the curt reply. "I was set to watch

you and fetch him if you woke up."

"Wait." Brian's command brought the boy back from the shop door. "I can wait while your brother finishes his meal."

Reluctantly, Kenneth resumed his place at the side of the pallet.

"Why does your sister not care for me?" Brian asked curiously. "Surely, nursing is woman's work."

The boy's face was in shadow; his reply, hesitant. "Uncle Tobin has other work for Gillian to do."

"But surely . . ."

"Gil brought you here. He has to take care of you. Uncle Tobin said . . ." His voice trailed off in an embarrassed shrug.

"I will repay you all," Brian replied stiffly. The silence held between them for some time. "Gil seems a likely lad," he said at last.

"Gil is the best fletcher in York," Kenneth asserted proudly. "Our father taught him the craft."

Brian's forehead wrinkled into a frown. "Makes bows and arrows, does he? For hunting and the like."

"Just arrows." The boy's tone conveyed his disgust at this ignorance. "Uncle Tobin is the bowyer. Gil is the fletcher. Our family have always been fletchers. Fletcher is our name. We took it when King William wrote it down in the *Domesday Book*." Pride entered his voice. "So shall I be, too, when I grow old enough to be apprenticed."

Brian sniffed restlessly. "Gil seems a likely lad," he repeated. "He would make a good squire."

"He would not consider that," Kenneth maintained definitely. "He is the best fletcher in York."

"But I would take him and train him," Brian offered.



"To be a knight?" The boy sounded doubtful.

"The noblest profession in the world," the man replied. "We were with Charlemagne and your King William." When the boy opened his mouth to reply, Brian hurried on. "We make war like men with steel. Not like some peasant churls with little sticks and bits of feathers. 'Tis not honorable at all to stand afar and shoot a fellow in the eye. Good enough for rabbits and such, but not for men."

Kenneth made a disgusted sound. "Gil is . . ." he began.

"Brother," a voice interrupted from the doorway. "Why did you not call me? I told you to do so the minute he stirred."

"He would not let me." Kenneth pushed himself up from his knees.

"I bade the boy stay until you had finished your supper," Brian added. "We have been having a talk."

Gil came forward with a pan of warm water and a roll of cloth. "No doubt he has exhausted you with his chatter. You must not tire yourself. I have to change the dressing on your side. You may go to your rest, Kenneth."

Left alone he knelt beside Brian. "I shall try to be as gentle as I can. Can you turn yourself on your side?"

"I can sit up," Brian declared strongly.

"No!" Gil's exclamation was horrified.

"Yes." Brian clamped his teeth over his lower lip. "Good lord, boy, men die in bed. If I lie here much longer, I shall start growing into the pallet." So saying he spread his elbows out at his side and brought them in pushing himself upward. Although the action set the wound in his side to throbbing, the pain was not unbearable. He flashed Gil a cheeky grin. "See," he nodded. But

when he exerted the strain on his abdominal muscles, hot lightning streaked through him. Despite himself an agonized groan escaped him.

"Oh, please, Sir Knight," Gil reached out a hand helplessly to touch him. "Please let me help you to lie back down."

His back bowed weakly, one hand pressed hard against his left side, the other propped limply across his drawn-up knee, Brian shook his head. "Damn." His breath was almost a sob. "What did dear kind Uncle Tobin sew me up with?"

Gil's reply was low, "A quiver needle."

"Is that all?" The knight's chuckle was like a rasping cough. "I thought at least a lance point." Face white with pain, he allowed his body to slump heavily onto his right side still pressing his hand into his left.

Gil bared the wound. "Oh," he cried, "some of the stitches are bleeding. Oh, poor man." Swabbing the area with a warm wet cloth, the youth scolded his patient roundly ignoring the fact that the man had lapsed back into a feverish stupor.

A week passed. While Brian's strength was slow in returning, his temper waxed short. Lying on the pallet in the shop bored him to the point of madness. Only Gil and occasionally Kenneth came near him. Of the twin sister there was no sign.

Vaguely, the knight was aware of the long hours Gil spent in tedious labor. The three feathers had to be glued firmly to the end of each shaft and held with pins until the glue dried. Soon he began to play a game, luring the youth away from his stool in the doorway on the flimsiest

of pretexts. At such times he would talk about the glories of knighthood, the honor of the position, the possibilities of a likely brave youth being knighted on the field for a gallant act.

During one such time while Gil knelt at the side of the pallet, tankard of ale in hand, a shadow filled the open doorway. Tobin Walton took in the scene before him with angry eyes.

"Gil," he growled, "leave us."

The youth sprang to his feet. His charge, sensing the battle about to be drawn between him and the other man, levered himself into a sitting position.

"Uncle Tobin, please, he is still very weak."

With a brush of his hand, the bowyer brushed him aside. "You," he commanded, "must leave."

Laboriously, Brian got his right knee under him and sought to push himself up. Though his head spun from the effort, nevertheless he attained a standing position, bracing his back against a support beam in the middle of the shop.

"Uncle Tobin, I do my work," the youth protested.

"Aye," the man agreed sardonically, "what there is of it. You know we work under commission for the Sheriff of York himself. If we do not fulfill the commission, we will lose all. The arms are being contracted through the sheriff for King Henry himself." He swung back to the knight. "You have tarried here long enough, keeping my nephew from his work, making him wait on you hand and foot. Let those of your own kind care for you."

"He is alone and wounded. He has no friends who would care for him here in England," Gil protested.

"His own kind can care for him, even as you have done," Tobin grunted. "Look, you," he swung back to

face Brian. "You have done naught since you fell in our way but take our time."

"I will repay you for your care," the knight began stiffly.

Tobin snorted. "'Tis naught of pay. The food and drink are naught. We are not clutch-fisted. But time is everything. Do you not ken? You take my time, Kenneth's time, and most of all Gil's time. He cannot stay abreast of the rest of us hopping up from his stool constantly to fetch and carry for you."

"Uncle Tobin," Gil protested again, "I will work harder. Do not send him on his way unhealed. You know how deep and dangerous the wound was."

His uncle faced him, turning his back contemptuously on the knight. "You know his kind would spit on you. If you had been wounded, lying in your blood in the road-bed, he would have ridden over your prone body. His kind have naught to do with charity or kindness. You have done enough, Gil. Now is the time to think of yourself and your family obligations."

Brian straightened away from the post. Bright anger glowed in his eyes, suppressing their usually predominant hazel tone and making them blaze jade green. "Gil will meet your damned commission," he declared. "And when it is met, I will repay every groat expended on me."

Tobin snorted. "By leaving?"

"No!" Brian took a couple of slightly unsteady steps to Gil's side. He clapped his hand on Gil's shoulder. "I will work for him."

## *Chapter Three*

The lamplight and the firelight combined to drive the shadows into strange shapes; some elongated, some compressed. It gleamed and danced in the wheat-gold hair and shimmered on the sun-gilt skin. Stripping the scarlet smock worn by the guildsmen of England from her body, Gillian unfastened the tight binder she wore across her breasts and breathed a sigh of relief. Tenderly, she rubbed her swelling mounds, each crested with a pink nipple.

Brian's presence in her workshop day after day had necessitated the tight bindings. Usually, she wore them only on the occasions when she appeared in public or took her place in the guildhall. At work she depended on her loose scarlet smock and a slightly stooped posture to insure her disguise. Her contemporaries and neighbors had accepted the fiction of a twin brother upon her

father's death. He had been away working as an apprentice in London. She had summoned him to return to his rightful place in the family and take the family chair in the hall. Of course, Kenneth had been much too young. The seat would have been lost.

Hugging herself with a shiver, Gillian remembered her panic. She had cut her long hair, carefully saving it and weaving it into braids which she wore even to this day when, as Gil's sister, she appeared infrequently to do the shopping. Cold sweat dewing her palms, she had walked between the rows of chairs held by her fellow craftsmen. Trembling, her stomach a hollow pit, she had taken her place on the dais, fearful that she would lose everything she prized in the world. All would be over. The seat of the first Fletcher would be vacant for the first time since the *Domesday Book*.

But no denouncement came. They had commiserated with her at her grievous loss. William had been a fine man, a master craftsman. No one could place the vanes like William. They were delighted to welcome his son into their midst. So she had taken her place among them, her scarlet smock, her black hose, her small gold-hafted dagger in her belt. Prominent on her shoulder and on the side of her soft, crushed-velvet hat was the fletchers' badge with the scarlet dot in the center.

Of course, Uncle Tobin had vouched for her. The idea that Tobin Walton would be party to deception was beyond the ken of any who knew him in the whole of York Minster. Noted for his taciturn personality and unimpeachable honesty, as well as his bows, he would have been the last man any of his fellows would have believed capable of disguising a girl as her nonexistent twin and installing her as a master craftsman in the



Ancient and Honorable Company of Bowyers and Fletchers.

Standing on one foot and then the other, she stripped off the thick black hose hanging them neatly in the cabinet beside her other male garments. With a sigh she pulled out the skirt of one of the only two dresses she owned. When the deception had begun, Tobin had ordained that all her dresses be secretly donated to the abbey for distribution to the poor. Only these two had been kept to drag out at opportune moments to preserve the fiction that there were two of them, Gillian and Gil.

She had not minded. Not really. Uncle Tobin had at first decided that Gillian should die of the plague, but she had refused. When Kenneth became a craftsman, Gil would die and Kenneth would take his place as the fletcher. If she killed herself as a female, she would have nowhere to return when the time came for her to marry.

She sighed again. For a long time she had felt no desire to marry. At five and twenty, an age when most girls had been women for ten years, she was still a virgin, alone, living in an isolated world of craftsmanship away from any who might get close enough to penetrate her disguise.

Until now. Into her life had come Sir Brian de Trenanay, his long-muscled body pressed tight against hers, his hand holding onto her as if to a lover. Her peaceful, contented life was destroyed.

Closing the door of the cabinet, she walked to the commode to stare appraisingly at her body in the small mirror above the basin and pitcher. The lamplight created shadows in the hollows along her ribs. Was she too thin? She cupped her breasts in her hands, pressing them upward. Turning sideways, she regarded herself critically.

With a *moue* of disgust she smoothed her palms down over her ribs where they arched above her concave belly. Her hipbones jutted forward. Not at all like the lush bodies of some of the plump matrons whose husbands formed other members of the company with her.

No, her body was not beautiful. Perhaps she had been lucky in the role life had dealt her. Her body would not have attracted men. Although she would have been comfortably dowered had her father lived, she would not have been able to make a marriage except by contract. The thought of her body and her fortune at the service of a man who could do with it as he liked with no thought of her preferences made her shiver.

Hastily she poured water into the bowl and scrubbed herself thoroughly. The cold water made chill bumps prickle her skin and set her teeth to chattering. If her bed were not heated . . . She hurried to the bedside and thrust her hand beneath the down comforter. A smile of satisfaction lit her face. At least that had been remembered. Since her appearances as Gillian were few these days, the service was frequently lacking.

Banking the fire in the fireplace and turning down the lamp, she slipped between the warm sheets. Snuggling down in the warmth of her bed, she slid her mind back over the amazing conversation of the morning. While Tobin and Brian had faced each other growling defiance, she had stood amazed between them.

Brian's statement that he would work to repay the debt of time he had exacted from his nurse had been met with incredulity by Tobin.

"The knightly breed do not touch their hands to honest toil," Tobin jeered. "They may stain them to the shoulders in blood but not such things as paint and glue."

"I owe a debt," Brian maintained doggedly, his face flushing a dark angry red. "I am a gentleman first. A gentleman never forgoes a debt."

"I should think a few coppers thrown in the dust as you ride away would satisfy your sensitive nature," Tobin sneered. Even Gil's protesting cry could not silence his bitter tirade.

"Not even that for you," Brian observed flintily. "You would have left me lying in the dust of that road. I know well to whom I owe a debt." He turned to face Gil, purposefully blocking his hard shoulder into Tobin's chest. "For your help bestowed on a wounded traveler, young Gil, I pledge myself to your service until your commission is completed."

Despite Tobin's snort of disbelief, Gil had believed the knight implicitly. The angry scarlet color had faded as the weakness he had put aside in the heat of anger swept over him. In its place rose a pallor accompanied by a tight pinched look around the mouth as he bit his lower lip. At the same time his hand moved to his left side, covering it gently as the stitches pulled at him.

Gil's mouth quirked into a hesitant smile. "I shall be glad of your help, Sir Brian." She extended her hand.

He clasped it firmly, his callused strength engulfing hers. His hazel eyes smiled warmly as he nodded. Drawing a deep breath, he turned back to Tobin. "Is your problem solved, Master Walton? Not only will Gil be able to return to work full time, but he will have a willing helper with a strong back. I am bound to serve you." His hard hand was warm as it encompassed her own.

Lying in her bed, Gillian rubbed her fingertips gently across her palm. A faint prickling sensation skittered down the nape of her neck. She licked her lower lip

tentatively. Suddenly, with a disgusted shiver, she rolled over onto her back in bed, staring into the darkness of her canopy. This man had aroused feelings in her she did not know she possessed. Too intelligent not to recognize them, she nevertheless further recognized that they must be suppressed. He was a knight. She, a fletcher. He was a member, as were all his kind, of the gentry; she, a burgesse.

Despite the romantic ballads, she knew herself to be beneath his notice. When he completed what tasks he considered to be his duty, he would ride away. Better for her if she remained a boy. Otherwise, he might desire her with no idea but his own pleasure. He would not care about her feelings. Indeed, he would be surprised to find that she had any, beyond acceptance and gratitude of the notice he bestowed upon her.

Relaxing into the warm mattress, she yawned widely. "Go to sleep," she advised herself aloud. "Tomorrow you have a busy day. And he is probably stiff as a stick anyway. Very formal and such."

Brian awaited her at the door of the shop, the next morning. Back braced against the jamb, knees drawn up, he turned his face to the rising sun. His gold-flecked eyes glittered as she approached. Bracing his feet, he pushed himself up to a stand. Only a slight tightening at the corners of his mouth revealed the pain the movement cost him. "At your service, young Gil," he smiled, drawing in a deep breath.

Standing in the door beside him, she looked doubtfully away down the street. "Are you sure, Sir Brian? You really owe me nothing. Uncle Tobin is just nervous

about the size of the commission. He would have me working night and day anyway. I expect no payment. Certainly not your labor." As a boy might do, she scuffed her boot at a stain on the stoop.

"Brian," he corrected. His hand closed on her shoulder. "If you are to be my master, you should address me familiarly."

Searchingly, she stared into his eyes. Was there a hint of sarcasm? Did he regard what he was doing as a joke? Only seriousness shone in their hazel and jade depths. A head shorter than he, she felt almost ludicrous as his master, yet she could use his help. Her mouth curved in a boy's grin. "Then, Brian, we must get to work. Come inside."

He followed meekly to the workbench, where she motioned for him to pull the stool from underneath it. From a basket beside it, she selected a long slender yew rod. "Each of these"—she held it up—"must be shaped to fit into one of these." She held up in turn a broadhead. Involuntarily, Brian drew back his head. The corner of his mouth lifted at the sight of the triangular barbed shape. "This is the stole," she explained patiently, laying the steel point aside for the moment. She laid the slender rod in his hands. "If you look at the nock end, you will see the index." Taking his hand in hers, she guided the ball of his thumb over the small raised rib standing perpendicular to the nock slot itself. "Feel it," she commanded.

He nodded. "I never realized it was there," he said rubbing his thumb back and forth over it.

"An arrow is a precise thing," Gil smiled proudly. "Everything from nock to point has to be just so. The broadhead point has to be directly aligned with the nock

and perpendicular to the index. Otherwise the arrow will not fly true." She watched as the man turned the length of wood over and over in his hands, his eyes intent, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"'Tis made in three pieces," he said at last.

"Oh, more than that," his master replied. "You are seeing the stole." She indicated the long yew wood shaft. "Attached to that at one end is the nock." She touched the attachment. "The bowstring fits in here, of course. And the nock index is glued to that. In the old days arrows were made all of a piece. The nock was part of the shaft and there was no index. But sometimes an arrow would be spoiled by a mistake in the nock. So now they are made separately and attached."

"What is the index for?" Brian studied the small nub of wood seeing that it indeed was glued onto the small shaft.

"A bowman can pull the arrow from the quiver and fit it into the bow without even looking at it. He can shoot faster."

Brian nodded in understanding. "I suppose that is an advantage if the game is leaping away."

Startled, Gil stared up into his face. "Uh . . . yes." Brian continued to examine the stole, running his callused fingers over the smooth joining of the nock and shaft. She cast her eyes down hurriedly to the broadhead in her hand. Its triangular steel points were designed to rip through flesh and bone, killing as much by shock as by actual destructive force. Once in, it could not be withdrawn, but had to be cut out or pushed on through. She swallowed.

"Our stoles are barreled," she hurried on, selecting one from another basket and showing him the careful

taper extending slightly from the center down to both ends. "Thenock must fit perfectly into the barreling, so no edges stop the flow of air past the joint. 'Tis not so important with the point end. The air will flow past anyway, so . . ."

Brian smiled sardonically, "So even a ham-fisted fellow like myself can be trusted to set the stole into the point."

"Well, perhaps not set it." Gil looked doubtful. "But perhaps you could just prepare the end to match the broadhead. I could then set them exactly."

"What about the feathers?" Brian wanted to know.

Wincing slightly at the derogatory note in his voice, Gil laid the broadhead down carefully on the workbench. "I do all the fletching," she declared, a note of pride entering her voice.

Lifting one eyebrow, he looked down at her half contemptuously, half amusedly. "Young Gil, a man can do so much more than play with glue and feathers."

A slow flush of anger rose in her cheeks. Without another word she turned away. From a third basket beside the workbench, she selected an arrow to which both nock and point had already been applied. "Do your work, Sir Brian. The tools are there. If you do not know how to use them, I will instruct you. I must be about mine, or Uncle Tobin will be seeking me out." Her back straight as one of her own shafts, she marched to the door of the shop, seated herself upon her stool, and bowed her head over her box of feathers.

Shrugging his shoulders, Brian turned to the workbench. If the boy wanted to be a knight, Brian would help him. Gil was a fine loyal lad, a squire a man could be proud of. He would be serviceable and undoubtedly was

intelligent. Such boys were always welcome in the orders. A parraïn could knight him on the battlefield. The opportunities were there although not so plentiful as in the old days. Still Brian determined that when he left this hovel, Gil would leave with him.

Her hands trembling with anger, Gil stared at the feathers in her box. Before her eyes they blurred. Anger turned to panic. Boys did not cry, especially ones her age with her experience. Why she should care whether this man admired her, she could not fathom. Yet his admiration and approval seemed very dear to her. The nearness and the heat emanating from his hard body, standing so close to her own, had created a flushed hot feeling coursing beneath the surface of her skin. Surreptitiously, she rubbed her hand over one cheek before turning the stroking motion into scratching and transferring it to her ear and the side of her neck.

Her vision cleared, the pheasant feathers came into sharp focus under her eyes. Carefully, she selected three, laying them out separately in the top of her box. Securing the stole in the vise, she spread the glue onto it just below the nock and in line with the nock index. Drawing a deep breath, she set the cock feather into the glue, fastening it down with a pair of steel pins. Her hands were deft and sure. All her faculties were concentrated on the delicate work. The knight-bondsman faded from her mind.

More than three hours passed before Kenneth came to call them to a meal. Sweat stood on Brian's forehead from the tediousness of the work. His days had been spent in the violent rigorous training of a fighting man. To sit still for hours on end moving only his hands in the tiniest of motions cramped his muscles.



At Kenneth's call he rose thankfully from his place barely repressing a groan as he stretched his arms wide and circled his neck on his shoulders. The heat and stuffiness of the hut made him faintly nauseous. A sharp pain racked his left side as he forgot the half-healed wound.

The young lad stared at the shafts on the workbench. "Is that all you have done?"

Nodding, Brian quirked an eyebrow. Puzzled at the question, he stared at the work. He had worked hard and steadily. He was satisfied that the amount he had done was respectable. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Kenneth! Do not disparage what Sir Brian has done." Gil's voice was stern. "He is only a helper. He has no training."

"Uncle Tobin will not like this one bit." Kenneth shook his head definitely. He studied the small collection of finished shafts with a faintly contemptuous air.

Gil tweaked her little brother by the ear. "Everyone has to learn," she insisted. "Tobin will be pleased that at least some work has been done. Something is better than nothing."

With a grunt and a shrug Kenneth turned away. "'Twill not do you much good if you have to stop fletching and do his work first."

"I would have to do the nocking anyway," Gil reminded her brother, "since you are helping Tobin with the bows."

"I like bows better. I might decide to become a bowyer," the young lad replied airily. "Come on if you want to eat."

At the door of the shop Brian caught Gil's shoulder. "I shall work faster if my work is not satisfactory."

She shook her head. "Better to work carefully and not

ruin a shaft. Kenneth is a bragging brat. He could not do much better."

"Look at me." The hard hand tightened slightly on her shoulder. "If I am too slow, perhaps I can hire someone to help me."

"Oh, no." Gil met his jade-flecked eyes. Not for the world would she let another man in her shop. The person would want to stay. She must ever work alone, so her secret would be safe. Brian was different. He would be away before long. "I will work beside you after the meal. There are some skills I can show you that should make the work go faster."

Returning together to the workbench after the cold meats and bread washed down with ale, Gil took a stool beside Brian's to assist him with the nocks. The heat of the day was upon them; the inside of the shop, stuffy. Before he resumed his seat, the knight stripped his tunic off over his head, baring himself to the waist. Unconcernedly, he tossed the garment over the edge of the basket and straddled the stool.

With a gasp Gil turned her face away. A hot blush rose from her throat into her cheeks. A frisson of something akin to fear rippled up her spine, its prickles reaching the hair on the back of her neck. At her shoulder the knight drew in a deep breath.

"That goes better," he declared. "Hot in here, is it not?"

Muttering an assent, Gil bent over the bench, trying desperately to keep her eyes trained on her work. She licked her lower lip. She must be cautious. Not by expression, not by word must she betray herself. Drawing a deep breath and straightening on her stool, she

forced herself to look at Brian.

His body was more magnificent than anything she could have imagined in her wildest and most romantic dreams. Revealed in profile, he sat tall on the stool. His skin glistened with sweat, highlighting the musculature of his steely right shoulder and arm. His chest, covered with curling blond hair, expanded as he drew in another deep breath of relief and bent to the work. The new position revealed the layers of muscle across his ribs, and the white bandage around his waist accentuated its taper. His chausses sagged low where they were loosely tied around his lean hips.

The magnificent body just inches away from her own, so close that she could feel the heat emanating from it, set her hands atremble. Despite her will to remain silent, a sound must have escaped her, for her benchmate turned to stare at her.

"What, young Gil? Shy like a girl? By all the saints, boy, men can look upon men." He turned to face her full front, his right hand going to rest on his right hip, with arm akimbo.

Agonized with embarrassment, bewildered and confused by the sensations that swept through her body, she squeezed her eyes shut, at the same time gripping the edge of the workbench with both hands.

The knight chuckled. "Come, boy." The strong warm hand came down on her shoulder. "'Tis hot in here. When no ladies are present, men may relax."

Opening her eyes and steeling herself, she stared straight ahead. "Of course," she nodded. "I was not concerned about your taking off . . . that is, I was only concerned that you might take a chill and sicken. You should

be very careful in your condition. You really are not a well man, you know."

"Nonsense." He turned her to face him. "'Tis hot as Outremer in here. You could get overheated. Come, take off your shirt. You will be better off without it." Suiting the action to the word, he reached for the hem of her smock.

## *Chapter Four*

With a terrified gasp Gil jerked away from the knight's grasping hand, but too late. He had gripped the bottom of her smock. The heavy woolen material was strong. With a laugh Brian drew her toward him.

"Oh, no!" Both her hands flayed ineffectually at his, struggling to push the garment down. Her stool toppled over and she fell backward with it, overbalancing him. His laughter changed to a muffled oath as he fell on top of her in a welter of arms, legs, and bodies all entangled in the hard wooden legs of the stool.

The breath whooshed from her body as his forearm slammed across her middle with all his considerable weight behind it. Stunned at first, she could do little else but lie gasping, her legs spraddled. The stool lay between them and Brian's body was draped over it. Gradually, the ceiling of the shop came into focus and she became aware

of his anguished moans of pain. Hastily, she pushed herself to a sitting position.

"Oh, Sir Brian, have you reinjured yourself?"

His head bowed almost against her breasts. She touched his cheek. "Damn you," he gasped, raising his head. His face, only inches from her own, was very white. Disgust and shame were written in every pain-filled line. "Damn you," he repeated. His eyes flashed angrily.

Digging her heels into the rush-strewn floor, she pushed herself out of his reach. Anger accompanied her retreat. "Why damn me?" she challenged. "You are the one who brought all this on both of us. If I had wanted my shirt off, I would have taken it off." Springing to her feet, she pulled her smock down with a violent motion, shrugging it back into a more normal position on her shoulders before smoothing it carefully. She did not look in his direction although she was fearfully aware of his harsh breathing. At last satisfied with her appearance, she looked at him.

He still remained draped over the stool. As she watched, he lifted his left hand from his side and stared at it. A disgusted growl erupted from his throat. "I am bleeding." Almost matter-of-factly he studied his stained fingers, noting without surprise that they trembled.

Instantly, she was beside him, her hands clasping his shoulders which now felt clammy to her touch. "Can you ease yourself gently over on your side?" she asked.

"Gently is the only way I dare to move," he nodded wryly. At last he lay stretched out on his back, his left hand pressed against his side, his eyes focused on the ceiling. "Damn fool thing to do," he muttered, "wrestling with a boy. Damn fool thing."

"Yes," she agreed, her face reflecting his painful disgust.

Working with methodical calmness, she peeled the bandage away from his waist to bare the wound. A sigh of relief escaped her. He looked at her quizzically. "You are very fortunate," she told him formally, rewrapping him without any further treatment. "One or two stitches were probably stretched a bit too much. There is a small bit of bleeding around them and one small corner has broken loose. But 'tis nothing serious. Everything is holding."

"How long before Uncle Tobin in his infinite mercy can take them out?" Brian's voice was a bitter rasp as she retied the knot tightly on his right side.

"I cannot say," she replied, her tone properly chiding. "If you insist on wrestling, the time may be long in coming."

He glared at her. "Look to yourself, young Gil. You may be the stronger now; but when I get my strength back, you will not crow so bravely, nor mock so loudly."

She sat back with her fists clenched on her hips. "You are the one who crows and mocks. I have done naught this entire day but my work. I did not try to force you to do something which you did not want to do." She rose to her feet, drawing herself up tall. Since he lay prone at her feet, she had the effect of towering over him while he gazed up the length of her body.

He grinned maliciously. "You are a silly boy to deny yourself comfort because of some odd shyness. Are you concerned that your body is too thin? Good lord, lad! I did not expect you would have those muscles developed." He propped himself up on one elbow to gaze contemptu-

ously around the shop. "Locked up in here all day bending your back over those silly sticks and bits of feathers. Why not be comfortable? Take off your shirt and let your skin breathe at least."

Gil pointed to the badge on her shoulder. A circle of white silk, it was embroidered with a black circle on the outside edge and a red dot in the center. From that dot radiated three black lines symbolic of the vanes glued to the stole. "I am the master fletcher," she reminded him coldly. "I am a professional craftsman. A certain standard of dress is expected. Would you go to a tournament improperly dressed?"

He blinked, his expression mirroring his horror at the very idea. When pageantry was everything, no knight with any pride however meager would appear garbed in anything but the best he could afford. Indeed some men accumulated enormous debts to afford the suits of chain and plate and the lavish materials for the panoply on which their heraldry was displayed. The value of such garments was staggering. Brian remembered with a sinking feeling that his had been stolen. His eyes glowed with a feral light as he stared into the middle distance remembering the agony of his ride and his anger at the thief.

With a sigh he closed his eyes for a long moment before opening them and sitting up cautiously. "I apologize sincerely, Gil Fletcher," he announced in a cool flat voice. "I was insensitive to the importance of your clothing in relationship to your office. I have not dealt often with craftsmen and then only in position of purchaser. I have had no occasion to work for them or to understand the formalities."

Warily, she studied his grave, drawn face for signs of



mockery. His gold-flecked jade eyes were deep pools. Suddenly, she realized that she could drown in those pools. A ripple of response began at the base of her spine and swept upward. Surreptitiously she swallowed in an effort to clear an unaccustomed thickness in her throat. She had lived and worked side by side with this magnificent man for a fortnight. She had bathed his body, dressed his wound, fed and comforted him. All these acts she had performed dressed as a man denying her own sexuality. His very helplessness had somehow infantilized him to her senses.

But he was helpless no longer.

Grimly, he climbed to his feet, rising well over six feet, the point of his broad shoulder even with the top of her head. The illness and fever had honed his muscles defining every curve with a fine line beneath the satiny skin of his arms and shoulders. Across his chest light brown hair curled in damp fishhooks. He exhaled painfully as he stooped to right the stools knocked over in their struggle.

"Never mind!" She leaped forward almost colliding with him, coming up short only inches from his body. Wildly, she fought the almost overwhelming urge to touch him. "You need not do any more bending and stooping for today."

Willingly, he straightened again leaving her crouched at his feet almost like a suppliant. She swallowed as she stared first at the broad columns of his legs and then at the tight-knit body that topped them. Again she swallowed convulsively. Dear God! The memory of his body bared to her touch when she had bathed him to bring down his fever rose before her.

Righting one stool clumsily, she rose. Her hands

trembled as she righted the other and pushed it under the bench. "Sit you down," she commanded, "and be on about your work. I need to check with Uncle Tobin about some of the yew rods."

Meekly, he obeyed her, straddling his place again and reaching for another stole. As one pursued, she fled out into the bright sunlight.

Alone hunched over on his stool, Brian drew a deep breath. As the pain subsided, his consternation grew. Uncertainty gripped him as he thought of Gil's panicky reaction. Surely the boy had been reared in an unnatural atmosphere. Since the time Brian had been a page, he had been used to the sight of men's nude bodies. His first duties had been to draw water for the baths of Sir Bertholdt, in whose household he had taken his training. He could understand a certain amount of shyness, particularly if a youth whose body was slim and underdeveloped were brought face to face with a man's body such as his.

He glanced down at his chest, striped in several places by dead white scars from long-healed wounds. His arms and shoulders were necessarily heavily developed; his life depended on his strength.

His mind took inventory of Gil's body. The boy's slender neck was white like a girl's; his shoulders underdeveloped in the extreme. The chest and waist concealed under the loose-fitting smock were certainly nothing out of the ordinary. Indeed Brian remembered catching a glimpse of some wrapping around the narrow chest. Possibly the lad was trying to pad himself to make his upper body seem broader.

Remembering the long straight legs, Brian smiled. The boy must have walked many miles to develop the calves

and thighs. Recalling their shape as he lay staring upward as Gil rose above him, he started. His hands gripped the edge of the bench on which he worked. Carefully he went over the whole incident in his mind.

Other things began to intrude. Gil's face was beardless. Not even a thin brown down marked his upper lip. The voice was a soft clear soprano. Yet the youth was well into his late teens. Of the age, Brian was sure, for Kenneth was a teenager himself.

Frowning, Brian struggled to recall the face of the sister. What was her name? Gillian. Gillian! Gil. Briefly, a memory stirred within his mind of arms holding him, of hands brushing his fevered brow, of a faint clean smell of some lemony herb. The same smell had come to him from Gil's body as Brian had accepted the lad's help to rise and reseal himself on the stool.

The side of Brian's mouth curved sardonically. 'Twould explain much. The wary looks from Tobin and Kenneth. The extreme reserve with which Gil treated not only Brian but everyone who came into the shop. The fletcher could be merely shy. . . .

Brian chuckled suddenly. What a trick these people were playing! He shook his head. Her deception reinforced what he had always believed about bows and arrows. Real weapons could not be manufactured by a mere woman. Catch a woman making a battle-ax or a suit of chain mail. Never!

A demon entered his eyes. The chit was in a precarious position working all day alone with a man. When he left her to go on his way, she should never hire an apprentice. As easily as Brian, some other man might pierce her disguise, with most unpleasant results. Obviously, the girl was vulnerable to blackmail. Better give her a good scare,

then warn her.

Feeling like a tolerant uncle, Brian settled himself more comfortably on the stool. His hands performed their assigned tasks, but his mind wove fantastic plots whereby to tease and teach his youthful master.

Safe in her room, Gillian pressed herself hard against the door. Under the tight binding she could feel the nipples of her breasts prickling as their nipples hardened. She wanted him! Her arousal created such sensations in her that she sank to her knees pressing her hands tightly across her breasts in an effort to still their throbbing.

What would she do? How could she continue to work side by side with him under these circumstances? Shaking her head in despair, she bit her lip. Oh, to be a woman. To be Gillian even for a night. Did she dare? Was she the same girl who only the night before had sternly vowed to suppress her feelings and live the life of a boy?

Drawing herself up tall, she strode determinedly across her room to the table, pouring herself a drink from the carafe of water. Her mouth no longer dry, she pressed her fingertips against her temples. The situation as she had recognized it last night had not changed. Only she had changed.

Crossing to her commode, she stared at herself in the mirror. She looked the same. Her fingers trembling slightly, she opened a small door located low on one side. Carefully, she drew forth the wig she had made of her own hair. Her vision blurred. What would Brian think of her if he could see her as she really was? Would he think her attractive? Did she dare to send Gil on an errand and appear at table tonight as Gillian?

She was playing a foolish game of chance. Sighing, she let the wig rest on the commode top. Her expression mirrored her desolation.

Then a determined gleam dawned in her eyes. She would appear tonight. Be damned to her uncle and brother. Surely one time as a girl would not destroy the deception.

Her lips tight, she crossed to the wardrobe and drew forth the prettier of the two dresses she had kept for Gillian to wear. It was a gold linen *houppelande*, decorated with a pale cream-colored silk on the turned-back collar that would frame her neck and shoulders. The dress could be buttoned modestly to the neck or left open. Tonight, she told herself, as she held it against her, she would leave it open. The gold-embroidered silk belt would cinch in her slender waist.

Hanging the dress carefully out of sight in the closet, she rang for the house servant to prepare a warm bath. From the same concealing part of the commode, she drew her gold caul. Staring at it thoughtfully, she balanced her wig in the other hand.

No, she would not wear the caul and its accompanying silken veil. Sir Brian de Trenanay was accustomed to the elaborate headdresses worn by the women of the most magnificent courts of Europe. He would not be impressed with her small finery. Better leave her hair uncovered, but her plaits wrapped around her ears. Carefully adjusting the wig on her head, she coiled the braided hair into stylish swirls.

A knock at the door startled her. Frantically, she dragged the wig off and thrust it into its hiding place. At her command two servants entered, one bearing the tub; the other, two large pitchers of steaming water. Several

linen towels were drapped over the side of the copper tub.

Emptying one pitcher into the tub and setting the other close at hand, the elder of the two bowed. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Er-yes," Gil's voice shook unaccountably. Were they suspicious because their master called for a bath in the middle of the afternoon? "You may leave me. I will ring if I require more. Be about your usual duties."

They had hardly closed the door behind them before Gillian began to strip the smock, hose, and breast-binder from her body.

Sprinkling the water liberally with her favorite herbs, a combination dominated by lavender and costmary, she seated herself in the comfortably warm water. Squeezing the bath sponge over her shoulder, she shivered in anticipation of the coming evening.

Despite the persistent ache in his side, Brian managed to finish setting the broadheads onto all the stoles in the basket. Just as the last rays of the sun withdrew from the shop, he stretched gingerly, rotating his neck and aching shoulders.

Damn! He would be getting a crook in his back if he did much more of this type of work. With a grudging flicker of admiration he acknowledged that at least some craftsmen had to have considerable strength and endurance to labor long hours at their crafts.

Yawning, he wondered idly how Gil, if he really were indeed a female, would have the strength. Perhaps the work he did now was always done by someone else. Perhaps Tobin ordinarily helped her. Perhaps this commission had brought an exceptional amount of business.

A cynical gleam entered his eye, turning its golden color to dark amber. Perhaps Tobin, that sly fox, had planned this from the beginning.

With a true knight's distrust for all the guildsmen whose orders and purposes he did not understand, he doubted not that the older man had conspired to exact free labor in exchange for the food and care given. Probably Gil also . . . Here he stopped himself. Gil was the only honest thing about this whole business. Even in disguise, for whatever reason, she had rescued him from the road, brought him to her home, cared for him, and fed him. He would entertain no evil thoughts about her.

Reaching for his tunic, he drew the garment over his head, noting as he did so the rank smell that enveloped him. His nose wrinkled. The odor of sweat and horses was a trademark of his profession. He even knew men who claimed to know ladies who preferred them direct from the lists. He shook his head. His tunic smelled so bad that it made his eyes water. No one could prefer this. He had worn the garment all through his illness.

Stepping out of the shop, he calculated the time. A tailor dwelt over his shop down the street. Perhaps the man might be persuaded to part with one of the rough garments he was preparing for servants' livery. Brian felt the size of his purse. Surely, he could spare a coin for the comfort of his hosts, if not for his own self-respect.

Forthwith he roused the tailor out by the simple expediency of pounding on the shop door. "Yes," the man agreed reluctantly, "I do have several garments prepared for the duke's household. But . . ."

"When does the duke expect delivery?" Brian inquired, fingering his purse suggestively.

The little man scratched his head before cocking his

eye cannily in the knight's direction. "You be the fellow staying with Tobin down the street?"

With an engaging smile, Brian admitted that he was. "I can no longer offend my generous nurse and host," he declared in an apologetic voice. "They have cared for me, a stranger. They are most kind and gentle people." Mentally, he prayed heaven to forgive him for the lie. Tobin Walton was anything but kind, and a more ungentle man never lived.

"Aye," the tailor nodded. "That Gillian Fletcher be a sweet girl, and her twin brother so alike her. I could hardly believe my eyes when he appeared. The old man had apprenticed him to a fletcher in London. When William's untimely death brought him back, we were all amazed." Gossiping companionably, he selected a large shirt dyed in cheap woad blue, all the time eyeing the muscular body of his customer. "This be for the smithy. He has a girth that would make two of you, but your shoulders are much the same. You can belt it in to make it serve. Do you be needing hose as well?"

Brian shook his head. The feel of the rough wool under his fingers made him know he was in for an itchy time. To trust his lower parts to this man's materials was a daunting prospect. "Thank you, Master Tailor. You have given me enough to make me at least presentable tonight."

They haggled for a few minutes over the price, the tailor amused and Brian disgusted. These craftsmen's overwhelming preoccupation with money grated on his nerves. Furthermore, he felt embarrassed that he could not merely throw the man a handful of coins, more than enough to cover the cost of the wretched garment, and stalk in proud silence from the room.



His precarious position drove itself home to him as he was forced to part with two coins from his small store. Without his armor he would be long in earning more. Briefly he thought of abandoning the idea and leaving the garment. However, his stench was almost overpowering. Even the tailor stood back away from him almost half the length of the shop.

Bidding the tailor a brief good evening, he turned in the direction of the spring which bubbled up into the fountain in the center of the cul-de-sac around which the homes of Tobin and Gillian had been built. Stripping to his chausses, he splashed his neck and shoulders. The cold water set his teeth to chattering but refreshed him after the hot day in the stuffy shop. Clamping his jaws, he turned to see a servant approaching from the house.

"Is the dinner about to be served?"

"Aye, sir. Mistress Gillian sent me to remind you. She thought you might still be in the shop."

"Mistress Gillian?" Brian raised one eyebrow quizzically. "Where did she spring from?"

The servant shrugged. "She comes right frequently. She takes care of her widowed aunt over in Tolborough."

"And where is Master Gil tonight?" Brian inquired presently, drying himself with the least disreputable part of his offensive garment before slipping the fresh one over his head.

"I cannot rightly say, sir. He is away tonight. I believe he went for more yew rods."

"No doubt," Brian chuckled as he headed toward the house.

## Chapter Five

Biting her lower lip in an effort to control her mounting nervousness, Gillian watched Brian saunter across the yard. The small leaden glass panes in the window distorted her face but did not, as she believed, hide her from view. His mouth twisted in a sardonic grin as he caught sight of her watching him. Genially, he raised a hand in greeting.

Hastily, she drew back. He had seen her and waved. One hand touched the wheat-gold braids wound neatly over her ears; the other adjusted the embroidered silk which belted in her full *houppelande* just below her breasts. Somewhat to her surprise, her breasts felt strange to be free of the tight binding she had worn for days. Engaged in smoothing a shadow of a wrinkle from the front of her skirt, she stood with head bowed as Brian entered.

Pausing in the doorway, he studied the gold and cream dress. For a moment he doubted his theory. Surely these softly curving lines could not be the same lines he recalled on the figure of the youth Gil.

Then she raised her eyes to his, and his doubts began to fade.

No other could have the brown velvet eyes framed by gold-tipped lashes. Privately, he had mused that the fletcher lad had eyes too beautiful for a boy. Now he recognized them. Gil Fletcher and Gillian Fletcher were one and the same. Whatever her reasons might be, she could not hide her sex from him any longer.

"My lady," he bowed low with a courtly flourish of his hand.

For an instant she stood as one turned to stone. How did one react to such gallantry? No one had ever bowed to her before. Her hands clenched in the folds of her skirt. Oh, yes . . . She extended her hand as she took a step toward him. "My lord."

He bowed low over it, his lips touching the tops of the fingers. At the same time he felt the calluses on the fingertips. Gil's hands were work-hardened. No lady of Brian's experience had such strong slender fingers. He did not consider that Gillian might have worked every bit as hard as her brother. In his own mind he was already equating her with a lady. No lady worked at anything more than her embroidery.

With a suggestion of a leer, he raised his head to stare down at her, his eyes searching her face for some nervousness, some flicker of communication of her identity. It came in the form of a blush. Fascinated, he watched as the rosy color flowed from the V of her bosom and spread upward to stain her throat and then her cheeks. He

almost chuckled, but he was not satisfied to let her know he had penetrated her disguise so soon. Instead, he stepped back. "Where is your brother, my lady?"

She raised her eyebrows. "K-Kenneth? He should be around somewhere. Do you seek him, my lord, for some special reason?"

He grinned as he studied her cheeks, noting how becomingly they flushed when she became agitated. "I meant Gil," he answered softly. "He disappeared early this afternoon, mumbling something about seeing Tobin about yew-wood. He did not return."

She curtsied, her eyelashes veiling her expressive eyes that could look as evenly as any man's when she wore her brother's clothing. Nervously, she touched her hair. "Oh, yes. I do recall that he had to go after some more shafts. I doubt that he will return before tomorrow morning. Will you have some refreshment before dinner, Sir Brian?"

"You are most gracious." Brian bowed low in his most courtly manner, his eyes on the décolletage of her dress. His appraising stare made her blush even more furiously.

Fetching a pitcher decorated with designs of roses, she poured a goblet of cool fruit juices and handed it to him. His hand touched hers in passing the drink. When she withdrew her fingers, she surreptitiously rubbed her thumb across their tips. She could not understand her own feelings. Dressed as her true self, she felt so much more uncertain of the proper responses. How did a woman react when a man stared frankly at her bosom? The hand that he had touched flew to the neckline of her gown, pressing the edges of the silk collar together where they formed a V. Suddenly she wished she had not opened her dress quite so wide. If only the shadowy

valley between her breasts was not quite so apparent.

Smiling secretly behind the goblet, Brian drank. "Very refreshing," he commented. "What is it? I seem to remember it, but I cannot decide from when."

"You drank it often when you were so sick," Gillian smiled. "It is the juices of apples and pears sweetened slightly with a bit of sugar and seasoned with cinnamon. When Kenneth was little, he had a finicky stomach, but he could always drink this drink."

"Did you concoct it?" Brian asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "After our mother died, I was the woman of the household, taking care of Kenneth and Father and Uncle Tobin."

"And your brother Gil, of course," Brian reminded her with a twisted smile.

Her brown eyes swept upward to stare at him, with a slight frown. Did he suspect her secret? "To be sure," she agreed.

But his face was blank. He finished the drink and set down the goblet with a sigh of gratitude. As if with great weariness, he rubbed his side, wincing visibly as he did so. "Your brother is a rough fellow," he informed her in a conspiratorial voice. "A sick and wounded man must look to him."

Her eyebrows knitted in a frown. "What mean you, my lord? Not Gil. He would never . . ."

"Fair dragged me off my stool today." The knight transferred his hand from his side to the back of his neck. Half-closing his eyes, he watched her reaction with barely concealed amusement. "Wrestled me to the ground," he grumbled. "And me a knight. I must be weaker than I thought possible. The idea that a stripling lad, not even bearded yet, could wreak such havoc on my

bones is embarrassing."

The velvet brown eyes flashed in anger. "I am sure you do Gil wrong, Sir Brian. He would never drag someone from a stool. Surely you must have done something. . . ."

Brian held up his hand in mock sternness. "I merely offered to assist the lad. He took my offer in a poor spirit."

"Gil is not poor spirited!"

"I beg your pardon, Lady Gillian. You know not your brother in his dealings with men. I know you love him and must by that love defend him, but I say to you he is a very sober fellow. How a little bit of joshing sets him off!" Here Brian shook his head. "I think he needs more time spent with men. He acts more like a silly girl."

At his words Gillian started, her eyes widening, her cheeks blushing. Her mouth, opened to protest and defend, closed abruptly. She spun on her heel, her skirts swirling out. With her back straight she thought to leave the room, retreating hastily to cover her confusion. His observation, coming, she believed, as a result of her failure to preserve her disguise, terrified her. If he had seen so much, what would others who knew her better think?

Watching her hurry out, he chuckled maliciously. The evening promised to be a delightful one. He could not help but notice the delicacy of her features. How could he have been fooled even for an instant by her disguise? The deep brown eyes were Gil's, the height, the soft slightly husky voice. Yet how had she concealed the very feminine curves?

In a flash he remembered the wrapping he had glimpsed under the loose smock. His smile broadened. He had thought the youth had wrapped his chest to appear

more manly. Instead, a young woman sought to conceal her curves. One eyebrow quirked. What pleasures he might find there, he could freely imagine. Perhaps after he confronted her with his discovery, they might share the joys of each other's bodies. She was only a burgesse after all. She could count herself lucky that she had attracted the attention of a knight.

A grin of anticipation spread across his face as in his mind's eye he remembered the shadowy cleft between her breasts. His body, celibate for several weeks, tightened slightly at the thought. His convalescence and self-imposed task might prove most enjoyable.

Dinner that night was a strained affair. From his place at the head of the table, Tobin Walton glowered from beneath his shaggy brows. At his right sat his nephew Kenneth, his eyes glued to the face of the man across the table. At the end in her accustomed place sat his niece dressed in her woman's garments, a flush staining her cheeks, as she, too, listened entranced to the tales Sir Brian spun of the glories of tournaments in far-off France.

"Are you saying that the knight actually had his horse led in by a girl with no clothes on?" Kenneth's voice trembled slightly over the negative.

"She appeared to have no clothes on," Brian grinned. "Of course, she was wearing a blond wig that hung almost to her knees in both front and back. She had garlands of flowers trailing around her body in the most strategic places. In truth her appearance caused quite a stir among the ladies and lords in the stands until they realized that she was wearing a closely fitted kind of flesh-colored garment."

"I should have like to have seen that," Kenneth breathed. He looked expectantly at his sister. "'Twould have been most amazing. Gil would have been shocked I bet."

"Why yes, I suppose he would," Brian agreed, pretending not to understand. "He is a foolish fellow about such things."

"Oh, well." Kenneth dipped his spoon into his soup without thinking. "What can you expect from a girl?"

At the sound of Tobin's growl of warning, Kenneth looked up guiltily, startled at what he might have revealed. His agonized expression was more confirmation for Brian.

"That is . . ." Kenneth faltered. ". . . Gillian would be really shocked. She could not even look at such a sight. *Gil* now. He would like it same as me."

Concealing a smile, Brian did not pursue the subject. Turning to Tobin, he met the man's scowl unflinchingly. "Where did you send *Gil* this afternoon, Master Walton?"

"To Tolborough . . ."

"To Brentharpe . . ."

"That is," Gillian explained lamely, "he went to Brentharpe to fetch some more yew and then will come back by way of Tolborough to visit . . ."

Tobin's voice rose above hers. "When and where a master craftsman chooses to go should be of no concern to a worker. Do you not have enough work to do in the shop, Sir Brian? If not, I can find more than enough to fill *Gil's* absent hours."

"I merely inquired, Master Walton," Brian replied coldly. "Despite my slowness, I have managed to keep working steadily. Have no fear that I shall not work on while *Gil* is away. I am true to my word."



"No one doubts you will work, Sir Brian," Gillian interposed hastily. "In fact if Gil does not return soon, I can always work in the shop setting the vanes. Our father taught us both the technique."

Tobin's brown eyes flashed. "You will do no such thing, lass. The guilds will not have a woman in the shops. You know the rules. Brian will work alone until Gil gets himself back." His teeth set as if he worried a tough piece of meat. "I suggested to him when he departed that he had best hurry. This trip, I dare say, will be made in record time."

What Gillian might have said was interrupted by the serving girl who carried away the soup plates. While the manservant held the roast for Tobin to carve, Brian observed that Gillian's eyes were staring downward at her lap.

"You need not fear, Lady Gillian," Brian spoke gently. "I will work as hard as I can without direction. Even if your brother is gone several days, he will find all is in order on his return."

"His errand will not take several days," Tobin declared firmly.

The rest of the meal passed in silence. Kenneth kept his lips firmly closed, considering that he had said quite enough. Feeling the full impact of Tobin's displeasure, Gillian kept her eyes on her food as the plates were set before her and removed. The evening, which she had contemplated with such anticipation, had turned into a sorry debacle. She only longed for the privacy of her room where she could discard this dress and resume her man's garb. In the morning, Gil would return and Gillian would depart for Tolborough to care eternally for an ailing aunt.

"We will now retire," Tobin announced as the savory was removed. "You, Sir Brian, must be tired from your long hours, and you so recently arisen from a sickbed. Gillian. You must depart early in the morning." The threat in his voice was undisguised. "You would never rest if your aunt were suddenly taken worse while you were away."

Drawing a deep shuddering breath, the blond girl nodded. "Yes, Uncle Tobin." Something very like a quaver made her voice wobble slightly.

Brian felt the tone rather than heard it. His eyes narrowed as he contemplated the adamant old man sitting like a stone at the head of the table. If Gil were really a boy, he would take him away from such a cruel guardian. At least he could offer Gillian, the girl, a taste of love before he left. Setting his thoughts on that goal made him feel very satisfied with himself as he rose from the table.

Tobin Walton allowed his niece no opportunity to talk to the knight, but sent her straightaway up to bed. Later beside the fire in the common room of the house, he stared at his unwelcome guest. "Sir Brian," he began abruptly, "I fear you are slow to heal. You must be on your way before long. That squire will be vanished without a trace with your armor and winnings."

Brian shrugged. "I have pledged myself to a certain labor here."

"What if you were released?" Tobin's eyes were hooded.

"None can release me but Gil," Brian replied. "I agreed to this task for his sake. I will not abandon him. He has stood against much opposition for my cause." His gold-flecked eyes glittered balefully.

Tobin drew a deep breath before nodding in agree-

ment. "Go to your rest," he commanded gruffly. "Gil will return tomorrow. The commission should be finished in a fortnight. It *must* be finished in a fortnight. We are too far behind to complete it without your help."

With a low bow, Brian de Trenanay left his reluctant host staring at the fire.

"Your sister is a beautiful girl." Brian watched out of the corner of his eye as a pleasurable flush spread up into the cheeks of the youth sitting in his accustomed place at the door of the shop.

"Do you really think so?" For an instant the clever fingers lay idle across the stole in the boy's lap.

"Indeed." Brian smiled to himself. "You are truly identical twins. Why set side by side with her hair cut short as yours is and dressed in men's garments, she might be taken for you."

The fingers resumed their work as their guide stirred uncomfortably on the stool. "Actually, she is much different from me," the low voice insisted. "You could easily distinguish between us if you but saw us together."

"Why do you not move the aunt from Tolborough?" Brian asked with feigned unconcern. "'Twould seem an admirable solution for everyone. Gillian could live at home and take care of the household. Furthermore, Tobin could find a husband for her. She grows old."

A muffled exclamation came from the doorway. "She and I are the same age. She will marry in good time as shall I, if I am so fortunate as to live so long and keep good health."

They had been working for several hours. Brian rose from his stool, stretching himself, his hard-muscled body

dwarfing the confines of the small shop. Casually, he strolled to the boy's side to regard him in the strong light. "And how old might that be?" Deliberately, he tipped the youthful face up to the full glare of the clear sunlight.

Smiling into the startled brown eyes, he studied the fair countenance as if he might draw it.

"Let me go," Gil protested, squirming.

Brian's hard hand descended on the boy's shoulder. "Not yet. I can detect no sign of a beard on that fair face." His voice assumed a serious note. "You cannot be more than sixteen, seventeen at the most, with no beard and a high girlish voice. Yet your sister seems so much older." Ignoring the squirming beneath his hands, he lowered his voice seductively. "Her breasts are so fully developed, such high firm mounds."

"You must let me go!" Gil's voice turned to a high squeal. "You . . . you should not say these things to me."

"Nonsense. This is men's talk, Master Gil." Brian's thumb dropped lower encountering the edge of the binding under the cloth of the tunic. As if to study the face more closely, he lifted Gil's body off the stool straightening it and pressing it back against the jamb of the shop door.

"Sir Brian!" Gil swallowed and lowered her voice with an effort to a deeper, gruffer tone. Her eyes slitted in the bright light of the sun. Dropping the shaft on which she had been working, she caught his wrist with both hands. Although her hands were strong, they were no match for the tough sinews of a seasoned knight. "Sir Brian! You forget yourself! Let me go! Have you gone mad?"

Her captor leered at her. "Perhaps," he suggested. "On the other hand, perhaps I suddenly see clearly."

"You know not what you do?" Gillian's voice was heavy with disgust. "Let me go!" Uncaring if she hurt him, she kicked with her left foot at the same time her right forearm slapped at his injured side.

But he was ready for her. Turning his leg, he took the blow aimed for his shin on the resilient muscle of his calf. At the same time he let go of her shoulder to block the swipe at his wounded side. "Not very effective in defense against even a wounded, weakened man," he observed archly as she drew back to pummel him again.

"Damn you!" was her only response.

"What else can you do?" he inquired politely, pressing forward with his long body and pinning hers against the doorjamb. His whole length now rested against hers.

With both hands she attacked his face, grabbing for handfuls of hair, but again he staved her off, this time by the simple expedient of letting go of her chin and catching both trim wrists in his hands. As if she were no more than a child, her arms were forced down to her sides and behind her.

The movement had the effect of arching her body into his. One sandy brow rose as he moved his body suggestively. "For a stripling boy, you feel wondrously well padded in certain places and amazingly lacking in others," he observed with a chuckle. "And your scent . . ." He dipped his face into the side of her throat, inhaling the clean lemony fragrance that he had noticed before with both Gil and Gillian. His breath tickled her skin in the hollow below her ear.

Fear shot through her. "Beast! Bully!" she cried. "You! with your knightly oath to defend the weak. How you break it to handle me so?"

Like magic he stepped back releasing her arms. Bow-

ing low from the waist, he spread his hands. "*Mea culpa*, my lady," he said softly.

"'Tis well that you remember—" She stopped in mid-sentence, her features frozen with shock. From dark wells of despair she met his amused gaze. "What did you call me?" she whispered at last.

"My Lady Gillian, the Fletcher of York Minster, I doubt not." He bowed again in acknowledgment of her raiment and her position.

"You are mistaken," she quavered. "Now I know you are mad, fellow. I am no woman. Surely not my own sister. She has gone to Tolborough this very day to care for our sick aunt."

Brian straightened. "Shall we see?" he questioned softly. "Shall I place my hands on your body and strip off that smock you wear? Do you think that because you prevented my doing so yesterday that you would succeed in doing so today. I acted but in jest yesterday. Today I would be serious."

"You would not dare," she asserted faintly.

His voice was even, yet menacing. "If I wanted your charming body, my lady, I am as other men. I would have it. You could do naught to stop me."

"I could scream."

With a movement so swift that she could not hope to dodge him, he lunged forward, his hands grasping her shoulders. His face loomed above her. Her lips opened, but before the sound could issue, his lips closed over hers.

## *Chapter Six*

Through long winter nights and warm summer days, lying in her solitary bed beneath the covers or dreaming while her hands lay idle over the shafts, Gillian had imagined her first kiss. Her prince, the most handsome man in the world, dressed elegantly in silks and velvets, would take her tenderly in his arms. She would close her eyes because the ladies in the romances always seemed about to swoon in ecstasy. Slowly, his lips would touch hers, warmly caressing, then withdrawing deferentially.

Brian de Trenanay, clad in a rough wool tunic, dragged her body against his hard chest. Like a falcon's swoop his lips came down on hers, covering her whole mouth, his strength pressing her head back. At the same time his tongue thrust between her lips that opened in a gasp of fear. Hotly driving into her mouth, he touched her teeth, her tongue, her velvet interior. Confused and not a little

frightened, her eyes widened as she strained with puny strength against him.

The futility of her struggle became apparent to her immediately. Frustration accompanied by a feeling of claustrophobic anger swept through her. Held fast in his hard hands, her back pressed against the doorjamb, her head strained back on her shoulders, her mouth filled with the taste and scent of him, she lost her breath. Dizziness brought weakness. Her eyelids fluttered, a thin whimper escaped into his mouth.

At her pitiful sound and lack of resistance, Brian's lips softened. He had not meant to hurt her, only to frighten her a little. She must be impressed with the vulnerability of her position. Women did not masquerade as men. They did not put on men's clothing and usurp men's positions. If she were found out by someone who did not have her best interests at heart, she could be seriously hurt. Perhaps even accused of witchcraft or heresy.

Above all, he wanted to protect her from such an eventuality. She was a good friend. Whether as Gil or Gillian, she had befriended him when he was in distress. He raised his head to stare at the face turned up to his. Gently, he slipped his left arm around her shoulders, while with his right hand he brushed a lock of wavy blond hair back from her forehead.

At the feel of his hand, Gillian shivered. The brutality of the kiss had frightened her, yet her body could not help responding to his hard, warm masculinity. Her own sexuality, so long repressed, had awakened tremblingly beneath his lips. Yet how different he was from the knight errant of her dreams.

Her palms flattened against the wall of his chest. She could feel his heartbeat, strong, steady, a little rapid.



Tentatively, her tongue flicked across her bruised lips. She felt him draw a deep breath.

Suddenly, she was ashamed. Ashamed for the way she felt, ashamed for being caught out in her lie. She released her breath in a sigh of disgust. "Are you quite through?"

For answer his arms dropped from around her and he stepped back. Drawing herself erect, she leveled her fiercest gaze at him.

His eyebrow quirked in response. Placing his hands on his hips, he returned her stare. "You see," he observed at length. "If I had cared to continue, you would be here on the floor. You have done a very foolish thing to dress as a man."

Hastily, she moved away from him, sidling out of the doorway and into the interior of the shop, putting distance between them to escape his dominating male-ness. "I am a master craftsman," she declared coldly, her back against the workbench.

"You are a girl."

"I am a woman. Furthermore, the two are not mutually exclusive."

"You do wrong to usurp a man's profession," his voice was primly disapproving.

She thrust out her chin stubbornly. "The tapestry weavers allow women in their guild. It is only a matter of time—"

". . . Before you are discovered," he interrupted her sternly, his hand raised to halt further arguments.

She shook her head. "'Tis little you know of what I do. I have been the fletcher for years. Kenneth was only a child when I began. No one would have known outside my family had I not made the mistake of taking you into my shop." Her voice roughened in its bitterness. "How

could you, who offered to help me in payment for my care of you, treat me so? Is this how you repay me? With censure and brutality?"

At the sound of the tears in her voice, he took a step toward her. Instantly, she skittered to the side. "Do not come near me, Sir Brian." From the workbench behind her, she caught up an arrow, brandishing it point first.

His eyes narrowed. For an instant he tensed, then relaxed. Cocking his head on one side, he chuckled softly. "Little girl, do you realize how ridiculous you appear? I am a seasoned knight. Weapons of all kinds are my business as is self-defense. Do you think that I could not hold my own against a little feathered stick in the hand of an untrained burgesse?" His smile was wide.

"Then leave me alone," she commanded. "Do not come closer. Let us not fight." Her voice assumed a pleading tone. "Please, Sir Brian, go away. I release you from your vow. Only do not give up my secret. To keep it will cause you no trouble. You can be on your way. With luck you may find that squire who stole your armor and be back in your beloved France in only a few weeks. What happens here in England can be of no further interest to you."

Even as she spoke, she lowered the arrow.

The gold-flecked jade of his eyes warmed as he shook his head. "What happens to you does interest me," he insisted. "You saved my life, Gil or Gillian or whatever your real name is. I fear for you. If I saw through your disguise, you are in danger."

Adamantly, she shook her head. "You are wrong. You saw through my disguise because I foolishly took you into the shop with me. I have never allowed anyone to work with me before. I have taken no apprentices, nor

shall I."

"How much longer," he jeered, "do you think you can go on without a beard? You are supposed to be aging. How much longer until someone looks at your smooth cheeks and realizes the truth?"

"Kenneth will become the fletcher soon," she protested.

"He speaks of becoming a bowyer."

"He will change his mind."

Brian shook his head. "You cannot know that. You will give up your chance of marriage and family." A thought struck him. "How old are you?"

She stiffened. "I do not choose to tell you that. You are too inquisitive. Remember I am still master here."

His emotions as well as his body had been aroused by their conflict. Too long without a woman, too accustomed to having his commands obeyed, her defiance angered him. His jaw hardened. "You still have not learned your lesson," he gritted. Before she could move to escape him, he had gripped her shoulder again. "How old are you?" he repeated. With his other hand, he flipped up the hem of her scarlet smock. His fingers hooked in the edge of the breastbinder and snagged it downward. Ignoring her cry of rage, he stared at the full cone-shaped mounds that burst free.

Twisting fearfully in his grasp, she sought ineffectually to cover herself from his appraisal.

"No girl, surely," he muttered as he beheld her pale smooth skin that seemed too velvety to be real. Even as he gazed, heated blood surged through his body. As one mesmerized, he put out his hand, his fingers trembling slightly.

Her body was all too real. Beneath his fingertips the

warm flesh pulsed. His eyes flew to her agonized face. Her lips parted as she gasped for air. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Oh, no."

"Beautiful," he sighed. "The gown you wore last night was charming, but it concealed much . . . as all gowns do." His breath fanned her as he bent to place a gentle kiss on her cheek beside her mouth. The harsh man who coldly sought to inspect her body because he was accustomed to having his commands obeyed was gone. He could not even remember why he had taken her again in his arms. He only knew the beauty of her body.

Beyond resistance, Gillian found herself responding wildly to his nearness. Twisting no longer, she leaned against the hand and arm that grasped her. His lips nibbled at the corner of her mouth, sending little frissons of fire and ice across her skin. She moaned slightly. Her pliancy acted as a command to him. His free hand smoothed the folds of the smock back over her shoulders baring her to the waist.

She shivered, her head sinking backward into the cradle of his shoulder and arm. The rasp of his palm on her nipple sent a jet of fire through her. Suddenly her legs would support her no longer. As she collapsed weakly, he lowered her gently to the ground, cradling her across his thighs.

The tip of his tongue traced the outline of her lips before he parted them again to caress and taste her. With fingers that trembled, Gillian touched his cheek where a heightened color began to glow. Her bare breasts brushed against the rough wool tunic as she stirred involuntarily, restlessly seeking respite from their tingling.

The knight released her mouth as he enfolded her in his arms, pressing her tightly against his chest. His lips

spoke at her ear. "Do they ache, sweetheart? How cruel you are to yourself to keep them bound so tightly all day! Poor things." He whispered these last words in her ear as his tongue flicked its lobe.

His silly, soft words pleased her. No one in her memory had ever said such sweet things to her. Was this the romance she had heard of in the songs of the traveling minstrels? She smiled shyly. "I have not minded," she assured him softly, "until now."

"Shall I kiss them for you, my lady?"

She shuddered at the thought. "I . . . I . . ."

"'Tis a most pleasant thing, I do assure you," he hastened to add as he planted a row of tender nibbling kisses down her neck.

The action made her squirm and shiver. He was turning her blood to liquid fire. Already it pounded in her ears. She could feel it staining her cheeks. "I do not know if . . . if . . . Is such a thing? . . ."

He chuckled softly. "Let me show you." He bent his head.

Before he actually touched the nipple, she felt his breath. Provocatively, he blew across her fevered skin which tightened involuntarily in anticipation. "How beautifully you bloom for me," he whispered, raising his face to look into her eyes. "Like a little pink rose. I must kiss it." He hesitated, his expression questioning.

She stared at him. His face loomed above her, hard and strong, his passion leashed, but straining. Suddenly, more than she feared his kisses, she wanted his mouth on her body. The kisses she had tasted were the most pleasurable things she had ever known. Her lashes fluttered over her eyes. She shuddered slightly. "Yes," she sighed.

His tongue touched the pink tip, tracing it in warm, moist circles. First one breast received his attention and then the other. Slowly, persuasively, deliberately, he kindled the fire within her.

His teeth replaced his lips, and the tiny nibbles which had so moved her as they traced the skin along her neck seemed like tiny shocks of pleasure rather than pain. How odd that a man's teeth should feel so pleasurable! Love was certainly the strangest of . . .

A slightly harder nip wrung a moan from her lips as she clasped his face between her hands. "Oh, please," she cried, drawing her knee up and raising her lower body toward his.

"Why do you cry out?" His voice was the voice of the tempter. His eyes glittered as they searched her face so close to his own. "Why do you raise yourself to me?"

"I want . . ." She could not answer. She did not know what she wanted.

His lips, then his teeth found her other nipple, wreaking the same punishment on its swollen tip. "Tell me what you want."

She gasped for breath, her voice a sob when she answered. "I do not know. Oh, Sir Brian, believe me. I do not know."

He chuckled. "Come, my lady. You are no thirteen-year-old girl. These breasts are fully ripe. You are a woman. Do not play games with me. I want no misunderstandings later."

"Mis-misunderstandings?"

At the quiver in her voice he paused. His breathing steadied somewhat. Narrowly observing her reaction, he lowered his hand to the joining of her thighs. Her eyes flew wide with surprise as his fingers pressed firmly

against her virgin mount kneading it gently.

Her fingers slid from his cheeks to clutch his shoulders as she half-closed her eyes. Like a cat she submitted to the strange pleasure his fingers brought to her body by touching that singular spot. A sigh escaped her.

Experimentally, he took his hand away, allowing it to rest gently on the top of her thigh. Her forehead creased; she opened her eyes questioningly. "You must tell me what you want," he said as if she had spoken.

She shook her head ever so slightly. Her cheek rasped against the rough wool that covered his body. His hand lay slack upon her thigh. The tension went out of her body as she became aware of the slightly precarious tilt of his thighs. She was in danger of sliding off onto the floor. To save herself, she dropped one hand off his shoulder to support herself.

Unceremoniously, he heaved her over on her side, rising and straightening his long legs. With one hand he protected his injured side while he stretched gingerly with the other. He did not look again at her breasts before he turned away to adjust his clothing over the bulge prominent in his loins.

At the sight of his broad back, she sat up. Hot blood ran into her cheeks as she dragged up the breastbinder, patting it into place, and pulled down her smock. Scrambling to her feet, she, too, turned her back on the center of the room to stare with unseeing eyes out the door at the patch of sunshine on the flagstones of the inner court.

She heard him move behind her, heard the stool creak as he sat on it.

"How many more of these damned arrows?" he croaked at last.

She jumped at the sound of his voice, so unlike its usual deep, pleasant tone. "We are more than half through with the commission," she replied. "Less than a week's work should finish everything. If you would like to be gone, I—"

"I shall finish what I began!" he snarled.

"There is no need," she argued. "I can finish everything. You have almost completed all the point ends. You work very fast. Your skill improves daily."

The tension of the sexual encounter began to dissipate in the fast-warming air. He drew in his breath running a hand around the back of his neck before picking up another shaft. "Think you I would make a good fletcher's apprentice, Mistress Gill . . . Master Gil?"

She grinned as she seated herself at the door. "I think you could be a master of any craft that you sought to pursue, Sir Brian. You have determination and steadiness. Your patience is not so good, but you learn quickly."

"I hate the tediousness of it," he confessed.

"It requires little in the way of exercise," she agreed.

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"I would have taken you with me," he said at last, a rueful note in his voice.

Gillian stared at his broad back. "You would?"

His back remained turned toward her. His hands kept busy as he talked. "I had never known any boy with your qualities of steadiness and trustworthiness, not to mention loyalty. I thought you were wasted here in this dismal shop working for your uncle until you got old. I would have made you my squire, trained you, taken you into battle with me. A battlefield commission is not



uncommon. You could have been a knight in a few years. I would have taught you everything." His voice deepened with regret.

She bowed her head, cognizant of the compliment he was paying her. At the same time, she felt a tinge of resentment at his attitude. Had she been the boy he thought her, she would not have accompanied him, she told herself. Did he not see the deep pride she took in her work? Did he not realize the time, the years of training that she had already taken to be the master fletcher? She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it abruptly.

No. He would not understand. His attitude toward craftsmen was deeply ingrained. They were beneath him.

The day wore on. As if by common consent, when Kenneth brought some food and ale at midday, neither stopped work. Instead they ate where they were, bent steadfastly to their jobs, each taking a bite at random and washing it down without thinking.

When the interior became too dim to see, Brian moved himself to the doorway, sliding down opposite her, to take advantage of the waning light and finish the last sanding.

At length he stood. "Finished," he announced. "Every last one of them ready to set the point to."

She smiled a little wearily and straightened her back. "We have done well. I have kept up with you. Tomorrow I will show you how to set the points while I finish the fletching. We shall be ready to deliver the commission by the end of the week."

He set the arrow aside and pulled her to her feet. Seriously, he gazed into her eyes. The dying sun threw its final rays on her face. "Why did you not tell me what you wanted?" he asked seriously.

She blushed. "I do not know what I wanted," she replied simply.

"I rather thought that had been the case," he smiled ruefully. "I see I must revise my concepts of the daughters of peasants. I had heard that all farm girls lost their virtue shortly after their thirteenth birthdays. You have proved that tale false."

A wry expression twisted her mouth. "For that lesson I am sure all the farm girls thank me. But you still have to prove it with them." She shrugged away from him. "Not only was your first concept false, but your second one is likewise. I am not a peasant. Nor am I a farm girl. I am a craftsman."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I cannot see the difference. You work for a living. You are not a lady to the manor born. What matter if you work among feathers on or off a bird?"

Her rage boiled over. "Oo-o-oo! You overtrained ox! You insult me without even trying. Never have I met anyone with such a lack of perception. Tell me. Is it only because you are a Frenchman? Are all Frenchmen so stupid that they cannot see anything—even the most basic concepts?"

"No," he replied haughtily. "Frenchmen see the basic concepts clearly. 'Tis only English, with their lack of appreciation for manners, for customs, for the respect that is due to rank and position, that fail to see basic concepts."

Her face was flushed with rage rather than embarrassment. "I am surprised that you could bring yourself to kiss someone so low."

He regarded her calmly. "Oh, I can bring myself to kiss almost any pretty face, mistress. I am a man as any other.

Men seek their pleasures where they find them. And I have tumbled many a peasant girl in many a hayrick along many a roadside between here and Outremer." He grinned shamelessly.

With a gasp she spun away, but he caught her, turned her back to face him, and tilted up her chin. "Furthermore, I never yet found one virginal nor unwilling." His grin changed to a gentle smile.

"Had you been unwilling, I would not have taken you," he continued softly. "My strength is not yet returned, but I am growing thirsty for a woman. Nevertheless, I would not take anyone who was unwilling. That type of lust is an acquired taste. I have seen it wreaked on the helpless after a battle by men too shocked to know what they do. It will never be my way."

His eyes held a faraway look for a second. Then he stared into her eyes again. "All my experiences have led me to recognize that you were something different. Mistress Gillian, you are a virgin rarely encountered outside a convent. You do not even know what you want. Confess. I am the first man who has ever kissed you."

She closed her eyes, somehow feeling ashamed of some inadequacy.

"No other has looked at your beautiful body, nor touched its secrets."

She nodded miserably.

He stepped back formally. "Then, my lady, I would not be the ingrate and take the babe's treasure. I am a knight. We are sworn to protect the weak and guard the pure." He bowed low. "I leave you as I found you. No man can say that Brian de Trenanay is dishonorable." So saying he left the shop to wash for supper.

## *Chapter Seven*

When Gillian entered the common room of their living quarters, she was surprised to find Uncle Tobin there before her. The old man slumped in his chair, his arms draped limply across his knees as if he slept. To be here before her was so unlike him that she stared amazed. Tobin Walton came late to supper more often than not. When he did arrive on time, he usually rushed through the meal and returned to his beloved workshop to work far into the night by candlelight. His bows were his life as he had often said.

Thinking she would let him rest until supper, Gillian tiptoed silently away leaving him to slumber on. To her consternation the cook greeted her with an involved tale of woe about his experience at the market. In consequence he had done little to prepare the supper. Suddenly so tired she could hardly think, Gillian waved him to silence

commanding him to serve broken meats from last night's roast and a lentil soup.

Her steps dragging, she mounted the stairs to her room. The heat of the upstairs room which had been closed tightly all day stifled her. Stripping away her soiled clothing, she wearily sponged her face, neck, and shoulders with tepid water before sprawling face up on the bed.

Her mind whirled as she tried unsuccessfully to sort out the happenings of the day and make some sense of the feelings that Brian had aroused in her. She was too tired to think. She would close her eyes and lie very quietly while she composed her mind. Then she would rise, dress, and go down to supper. In case the cook could prepare something edible on such short notice. In a burst of self-pity, she reflected that she had too much to do being two people. Either Gil or Gillian ended up with a neglected job. In this case Gil had no supper because Gillian had not supervised the running of the household efficiently. Disgusted with herself, she rolled over and closed her eyes. Just for a minute. Only for a minute.

At the sight of Tobin Walton's face, Brian de Trenanay sprang to his side. The older man's head lolled sideways on the back of the chair. His usual healthy flush was replaced by a grayish pallor. When Brian touched the man's forehead, he found it unnaturally cool and bedewed with sweat.

Uncle Tobin stirred feebly, fluttering his callused fingertips toward his throat. In understanding Brian loosed the man's neckcloth and tilted his head upright, gratified to hear his host's breathing ease somewhat.

"What happened? Where do you hurt?"

The breath came rasping from the slack lips. "Chest . . ." Again the fluttering hand movement.

Brian pulled aside the man's clothing but could see nothing. The deep-barreled rib cage barely moved, so labored was the breathing. Pasty white, heavily muscled, covered in the center with a mat of grayish white curly hair, the chest looked normal. Something must be amiss inside the man's chest.

Brian left the man's side for a moment to a return with a pitcher of ale from the kitchen. Pouring a draught, he held it to Tobin's colorless lips. The man could manage no more than a few sips although his eyes spoke his gratitude before they closed weakly.

Without further preamble Brian slipped his good right arm under Tobin's shoulders and heaved the man to his feet. Crouching, he guided the heavy body onto his right shoulder and lifted gingerly, using primarily the strength in his thighs. Nevertheless the weight wrenched his half-healed side, eliciting a grunt that Brian made no effort to suppress.

The knight was dripping with perspiration when he stretched Tobin's body at length on the bed. The bowyer's face looked grayer than ever; his breath came in barely perceptible movements of his chest. Ignorant of the care of such a condition, Brian covered him and went in search of Gil.

When a knock drew no response, he opened her door. In the dimness of the room her body bloomed palely opalescent. Despite the urgency of the situation, he could not suppress the instinctive tightening of his loins at the sight of her long straight limbs flung wide on the dark linen spread. He shook his head in wonder that he had

ever taken her for a boy. Her femininity was so obvious.

"Gillian," he called softly, as he approached the bed.  
"Gillian."

She stirred groggily then buried her face in the pillow with a muffled groan.

"Gil," he called again. "Wake up."

"Uh-uh."

He touched her shoulder trying to keep his eyes from the firm clean curve of her buttocks. "Gil, you must get up. Uncle Tobin is sick."

Her eyes opened, staring uncomprehendingly at the man's thighs in her line of vision. Disoriented and unaware, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. "Uncle Tobin?"

Brian gave up all pretense of control. Staring frankly at the slender body completely nude in the fading light of day, he clenched his fists. At least he would keep his hands off her. "Uncle Tobin has had some sort of seizure. I have carried him to his room."

She ran her fingers through her hair, then childishly dug her fists into her eyes to rub the sleep from them. "I'm coming," she moaned. Not until she swung her legs over the side of the bed did she become aware of her nudity. "My God!"

Immediately, he spun around presenting her with his back. "Hurry, Gil," was all he said.

Suddenly, she giggled.

His shoulders stiffened. He glanced inquiringly over his shoulder.

She had gathered the spread around her body and stood looking around her dazedly. Was she hysterical? She giggled again.

"Gil?"

"I was just thinking . . . how you can call me Gil when you have proof incontrovertible before your very eyes. You can have no doubts about my sex." She rounded the end of the bed, trailing the spread behind her. Awkwardly she bent to retrieve her clothing from the floor.

"I never did have, my lady. Not since I have been in my right mind and caught sight of you. No two people can look so much alike as you and your twin brother pretended to do." He stirred uncomfortably as he heard the rustle of her clothing.

Then she was beside him, touching his upper arm. "I am ready." Her face was calm as she looked up into his eyes.

"Then come, Gil." He strode ahead to open the door.

Tobin Walton lay like one dead. His breath rattled faintly in his throat.

"Shall I go for a physician?" Brian offered as he stared at Gil, who bent over the bed, her face suddenly gone pale.

The girl raised anguished eyes to his. "Perhaps you had better. He is beyond my simple skills. I fear for him. Oh, Brian. I fear he has had some kind of seizure that may leave him permanently damaged. 'Twas so with my father. One day he was well. The next, stretched flat on his back. He never regained his senses." These last words were uttered in a choked voice. She put her hand over her mouth.

Brian wasted no time. "Where is the physician's office?" he asked gruffly.

"At the head of the lane where it turns into the market circle." Gil wiped perspiration from her uncle's forehead with the edge of the sheet. "Send someone to find Kenneth and bring ale, please," she begged.



Brian's fingers closed over hers in silent comfort before he hurried out. She heard him taking the stairs in great bounding strides, heard him calling for Kenneth. As in a daze she regarded her uncle, the patriarch of her family. If he died, she would be the oldest. How would she handle herself without him as a buffer?

"Uncle Tobin," she whispered. "Oh, Uncle Tobin." She pressed a kiss against his cheek. How shrunken he already appeared! Tears started in her eyes as she drew a sobbing breath.

The eyelids flickered slightly. "Lass . . ." The word slipped from between his lips on the breath he expelled.

"Oh, Uncle." She touched his cheek. "The physician will be here as soon as Brian can fetch him. You will be all right."

Beneath her fingers the head stirred slightly in negation. The eyelids flickered again. "... Commis . . . sion . . ."

"Oh, Uncle Tobin." She was sobbing softly now. "Please save your strength. Do not worry about the commission. 'Tis no matter. *You* matter."

The eyelids flickered again. The breath hissed faintly between the parted lips. "Bows . . ."

"Kenneth can finish them. Or he can get one of the other bowyers to help him." Frantically, she wasted a glance at the door. Where were Kenneth and Brian? A trickle of liquid slipped from the corner of her uncle's mouth. Tenderly, she blotted it with the edge of the sheet. Not even a pitcher of water was included in the Spartan appointments of her uncle's room.

Not for endless minutes did she hear the sound of hurrying footsteps on the stairs outside. Expecting Kenneth, she was surprised to see Brian bearing a tray.

Awkwardly, the knight crossed the space to the bed, his eyes fixed on the items balanced on the tray. With a sigh of relief he set them down on the floor.

Despite her concern, Gillian could not suppress a smile. The trek up the stairs probably represented the first and only time that Brian de Trenanay had ever carried anything such as a servant might do.

Wiping his hands on his chausses, he poured ale from the pitcher into the tankard and held it out to her. "I have sent Kenneth for the physician. He could run faster than I and besides . . . he knew the way." He hoisted himself gingerly favoring his side as he did so.

Gil slipped her hand under Uncle Tobin's neck. "Here is some ale for you, Uncle. Try a sip."

But the grizzled head was a dead weight in her hand while the ale trickled uselessly down the side of his mouth and into his beard. With a sob Gil gently lowered him to the pillow. Brian sought and found the weakly fluttering pulse in the flaccid wrist. "Keep up your spirits." He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "As long as he is alive, there is hope. When he regains consciousness, he will mayhap be stronger. Sleep is a great healer of wounds."

Skeptically, but gratefully, she smiled at him. A knight whose only experiences were with younger men whose bodies were in the peak of condition could not be expected to know the illnesses of older men in their declining years. Nevertheless, his words warmed her. Somehow, his presence left her feeling less alone.

Weary hours later Brian, Kenneth, and Gillian sat together in the parlor awaiting the physician's descent. The prospect was not good. Within minutes after he had made the initial examination, he had sent for the leech to

bleed the patient. The family had not been allowed to stay in the room during that procedure.

Huddled against his sister's side, Kenneth shivered from time to time as nervous rigors set his body atremble. "What will become of us if Uncle Tobin dies?"

Kissing the top of his head, Gillian smiled wanly. "We will go on as before. You will be the bowyer and I, the fletcher."

"But . . ."

Brian raised a hand in warning. The bedroom door opened at the head of the stairs. The physician and his leech were descending.

Gillian sprang to her feet, her hands outstretched. Her brown eyes skipped from one to the other. The leech showed little interest. Indeed his stolid expression gave the impression that he evinced little interest in anything. His job was to gather leeches from the salt marshes. Beyond that he had no mind for anything else.

The physician's face was grave. "I have bled him, so the humors may be equalized; but I fear that some damage may have been done by the excess of blood," he intoned without preamble. "A most sanguinary man is Master Walton. I have thought several times in the past that he should have had a regular time when he should be leeches. Indeed, I spoke to him of this some while ago. But he refused." The man shook his head; his lips twitched in a slight smile.

Uttering a faint exclamation, Brian turned away and proceeded to pour himself a tankard of ale. Gillian glanced at him quickly. Beside her the man of medicine stiffened. "Evidently, you disagree with my treatment, sir," he remarked stonily.

Brian shrugged. "A man has just so much blood in

him. To let it out unnecessarily seems a waste."

"Ah, but what if he have too much?" The physician began to develop his favorite theme. "The balance of humors in the body is something that young men do not understand." This remark was directed soothingly toward Gillian, who stared doubtfully at Brian's back. "I assure you, Mistress Gillian, that my treatment will restore Master Walton to health." He paused delicately and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "If it be God's will that he be restored. Some things are left in the hands of the Almighty. His skill far surpasses man's."

"Far indeed," Brian snorted.

The physican drew his taffeta-lined cloak around him. "I have left a mixture to strengthen Master Walton when he revives. He should drink much water and eat nothing at all, except thin broths. Above all, give him no ale, nor strong drink, nor red beef." He looked at Brian significantly. "These things thicken and heat the blood. Master Walton's needs to be cooled."

Gillian followed him to the door where he turned back for one last word. "Tomorrow I would speak with young Master Gil. He, as head of the household now, will need to be informed of his uncle's condition."

With the door closed behind him, Gillian sank down on the bench before the fireplace. No fire had been lighted. The room was almost in darkness except for a branch of candles on the table. For several minutes no one spoke.

At last Brian broke the silence. "Has the cook prepared us some dinner?"

Both brother and sister roused at the question. Hunger asserted itself in healthy young bodies. Kenneth grinned slightly. "I had forgotten all about eating."

Gillian grinned in her turn. "'Tis the first time." Playfully, she jabbed at her little brother, cuffing him lightly on the shoulder. "Surely, Cook has prepared something although by this time it is probably cold."

The three sat silent over a meal of cold soup and hard bread. No one had the heart to do more than pick at the food. Finally, Kenneth laid down his spoon in disgust. "Enough is enough," he groaned softly. Rising he hugged his sister tightly around the shoulder. "I think things will look better in the morning," he prophesized with wisdom beyond his age.

"Good night, Kenneth." Gillian kissed him wearily on the forehead.

When the boy had left, she looked at Brian. "Will you stay in the house, Sir Brian? My bed will not be used. I shall stay in Uncle Tobin's room. I . . . I would appreciate your being near by . . . in case I need help."

"We can watch together," Brian suggested softly. His heart stirred strangely. She looked so tired. The events of the day had drawn a deep furrow between her brows. Her slender shoulders slumped beneath the fabric of her dress.

Shaking her head, she pushed back her chair. Instantly, he was beside her placing his arm around her shoulder, supporting her as he led her from the kitchen. She stiffened, remembering the near assault on her person in the shop that day. Had she been wrong to ask him to stay in the house with them? Never had she felt so alone or so vulnerable. How she longed to lay her head on his shoulder and with it her responsibilities if even for a moment.

But she dared not. The memory of what had happened in the shop, the fear of exposure of her sex to the world,

the fear of what would happen if Uncle Tobin died, all seemed overwhelming. So she stiffened her spine. Brian de Trenanay might be a friend. But first, he was a man. Women were unworthy and incapable in the eyes of most men. He might decide to expose her "for her own good," considering that she was probably incompetent to assume the responsibility and therefore the destiny for her family. He might merely decide to take advantage of her unprotected state and press himself upon her physically. The debt which had bound him to her was paid. The commission was finished.

With what she hoped was a cool and assured demeanor, she stepped away from him. Instantly, he let his arm drop. "I thank you for your offer, Sir Brian, but you are tired. You have worked hard all day. I took a nap. I will sit with my uncle. If you will but be here in the house, I can summon you in case of need."

Her brown eyes seemed black in the flickering candlelight. Brian stared into their depths, reading nothing. Yet the coldness of her voice told him much. He had frightened her with his violence. He damned himself for the stupidity of his action. He had only added to her burdens. Yet his behavior might serve a useful purpose. She would be more on her guard than ever. With Tobin incapacitated, perhaps forever, she might see the futility of this disguise and abandon it.

He bowed slightly from the waist. "As you will, Mistress Fletcher. May I know whom I will address in the morning? Will it be Master Gil or Mistress Gillian?"

She flushed slightly and laid a tired hand to her forehead. "You heard the physician. He wishes to speak to Master Gil. Gillian will have to disappear for a while."

"The good people who come to visit Master Walton

will think it strange that his niece prefers to nurse some aunt in another township rather than devote herself to the care of her uncle," Brian reminded her. "'Tis time to give up this foolish masque, Gillian."

"Never!" She retreated from him, back into the shadows away from the candlelight.

"Tobin was a fool to let it begin. Now he cannot protect you."

"Leave me, Sir Brian!" she commanded angrily. "You do not have a say in this decision. What I did I would do again. If necessary, Gillian will die of the plague. What chance has she to live in this world of men unprotected? A chance to marry some lout who would use her body to get children on until she died in childbirth, a chance to be nothing in this life but a stupid and ill-used housewife." She spat the last word from her mouth.

"'Tis what you were made for," Brian argued doggedly. "There is a plan in all things. Women were made to bear children and to care for their husbands. Men were made to work and care for their families."

"Ah, but men have choices, whether to marry or not. And if they do not, they do not starve or live dependent on others. You, Sir Brian, where is your wife? You ride free from town to town, from land to land. You are respected and admired wherever you go. What if Gillian Fletcher were to try to do the same thing?"

"A woman . . ." Brian's voice was incredulous. "A woman ride about fighting in tournaments." He laughed. The idea was ridiculous.

"She might not be able to fight, but what if she were an armorer, or a surgeon, or a . . . ?" Her voice rose hysterically.

He held up his hand for silence. "You are overtired.

Mistress Fletcher. Calm yourself." The other hand came out placatingly. "Gil," he whispered. "Gil. You can trust me. I will be faithful. You have nothing to fear from Brian de Trenanay. This I swear to you."

Silence answered this pledge.

He shrugged tiredly before turning away to scatter the fire on the hearth. "I will put all to rights down here. Get yourself comfortable in Uncle Tobin's room." Behind him he heard the rustle of her clothing as she left.

When he came up the stairs, her room was empty, the spread from her bed was gone as was one of the pillows. Pulling his tunic over his head, he sat on the edge of her bed to pull off his boots. The feather mattress sank beneath his weight. Idly he realized that he looked forward to the soft sleep it would afford. Stripping off his chausses, he hung his garments over the back of the chair and yawned hugely. He was sleepy.

Clad in only his loincloth, he padded across the hall to the door of Tobin's room. "Gil," he called softly.

"What?" came the reply.

"Shall I leave the doors open? That way you can call to me if you need me."

Silence again followed his question. He was about to turn away when at last an answer came.

"Yes, thank you."



## *Chapter Eight*

"You . . . mus . . . take . . . th' . . . th' . . . commis-  
sion . . . Gil." Tobin Walton's voice was slurred, the  
words coming thickly from his throat with many a pause  
between them as he struggled to remember their sense.  
He smiled faintly, his mouth curving up on one side only.  
His right side lay almost paralyzed. Only an occasional  
monumental effort allowed him to twitch his thumb or  
stir his leg. "Pro . . . mised . . . planned . . . trip . . . you  
. . . Kenneth . . ."

Tears sparkled in Gillian's eyes. Although the physi-  
cian assured her that Uncle Tobin would recover some  
use of himself, she could not doubt but that the road to  
full strength was too long for a man his age. The good  
right hand of a craftsman was all in all. Without its capa-  
bility the heart would go out of the man. "Would that  
you were able to make the journey?" she whispered, kiss-

ing him on the forehead.

He frowned, his left eyebrow drawing in toward the center of his forehead and giving him an unconsciously comical appearance. Clumsily, he patted her hand before his eyes closed. Finally, his breathing evened, indicating that he had drifted into a natural sleep.

With a light tap at the door Kenneth entered. He tiptoed to the bedside where he stared down at his uncle. His young face was grave. At last he motioned with his head that Gil was to accompany him out of the room.

"Did he tell you?" he asked without preamble.

"Yes," his sister replied.

"He talked to me yesternight while I sat with him. I had to leave the room afterward to weep. 'Twould worry him if he saw me weep."

"There must be someone who can take the commission to London. What about Master Jenkin?" Gil knew the answer before she asked the question.

Kenneth snorted. "That old thief. If he took his commission and ours, we would have seen the last of him. He would set up a new business somewhere else on our money."

Brother and sister were silent. The noises made by the cook preparing the evening meal sounded loudly in the quiet room. At last Gil drew a deep breath. "I must make preparations to leave without delay."

Kenneth nodded. His chin quivered. "I shall be the man while you are gone. Master Gil, the fletcher, will take the commission of bows and arrows from York Minster to London." A tear overflowed down his smooth cheek. "Perhaps you will see the king."

Gil looked inquiringly at her brother.

"The commission is for King Henry V. Uncle Tobin

told me yesternight. 'Twas the first time he had felt able to talk. He was afraid he might not be able to tell you. I am too young to make the journey, but not too young to stay here and take care of the shop." He snuffled slightly, wiped the back of his hand across his cheeks, and shook his head. "I can follow his direction, Gil. I know I can. As soon as he is able, Wat can carry him down to the shop. He can sit with me and direct the work. 'Twill be the chance I have waited for . . . to be a bowyer."

Frowning, Gil raised her hand in protest.

But Kenneth hurried on. "Oh, I know. You want me to be the fletcher. But, Gil, I have not the skill in my fingers that you do. My hands are strong, but not agile. I have tried and tried. The feathers drive me mad. My hands sweat and then all is ruined. You are the fletcher as our father was before you." He grinned almost happily. "When you return we will be bowyer and fletcher together. The Fletcher brothers. What a grand sight we will be in the guildhall! And Uncle Tobin will be the grand master." His eyes glowed at the thought. "I will sit with Uncle Tobin until supper," he offered. "If he wakes I can tell him all about how wonderful everything will be."

Brian found her sitting just as Kenneth had left her. Gillian's hands lay limply crossed in her lap. Her eyes stared into a frightening future. The distance to London from York appalled her. How could she hope to make the trip when she had never been more than ten leagues from her home in her life?

So lost was she in her own terrors that she did not see Brian until he dropped down beside her on one knee and took her hand. "Is . . . is Uncle Tobin worse?"

She shook her head. A wan smile lit her face as she stared into the knight's concerned hazel eyes. "No, he is better. He spoke to me this morning and to Kenneth yesterday night."

Brian waited patiently, chafing her cold hands between his own warm ones.

She drew in a deep breath. "He gave us some instructions."

Brian chuckled wryly. "And . . ."

"Kenneth is to start work immediately as the bowyer. I am to take the commission to London." She pressed her lips tightly together to still their trembling. Her forehead creased into an anguished frown.

Brian nodded as he dropped back onto his haunches. "I had thought he would have done so."

She stared at the man aghast. "But, Brian, I do not know the way." This last piece of information came out in a wail.

He stared at her for a minute before throwing back his head and laughing. "Is that all that bothers you? 'Tis no cause to be concerned. I shall be your guide. I have paid my debt to you. The commission is completed. 'Twill be my pleasure as a knight to escort you to London." When she looked skeptically at him, he laughed. "Knights are, after all, better trained to guard and guide than to labor with their hands."

"You are so good, Brian." She bent her head over his hands that warmed her own. In a gesture as spontaneous as it was charming, she kissed the scarred fingertips.

It was the wrong thing to do. Liquid fire shot through his body. Dressed in boy's clothing, every curve of her long, shapely legs was revealed. He had seen her body and had held it. Furthermore, his celibate state had con-

tinued much longer than he had ever thought possible. His hands clenched as his breath burst from between his lips.

Startled, she flung up her head.

They stared into each other's eyes. There she read his desire, hot and passionate. He was after all a man. Although she did not understand what he was feeling, she realized that he wanted her. "Careful, Mistress Gillian," he whispered.

She pulled her hands away. Sternly, she rose to her feet, staring down into his gold-flecked eyes. "Gillian is dead," she announced. "She will never return. Only Gil will return from London to resume his rightful place as the fletcher. Kenneth will be the bowyer and I will be the fletcher."

They joined with the other craftsmen from York Minster who also carried their commissions for the king. Most had both journeymen and apprentices to add strength to the escort. Since Tobin Walton's illness was well known, all understood the odd-assorted pair of knight and youth. More than one nodded his head sagely, thinking that if Gil Fletcher had been wise, he would have taken several apprentices long ago. Had he done so, he would have had the help he now required in this emergency.

The knight rode beside the carefully packed wagon. Uncle Tobin's precious bows had been carefully shielded from the elements by oiled hides and raw wool. Gil's arrows likewise were protected in wooden barrels, covered over with the same hides and bestowed evenly along the wagon's bed. Still the weight was prodigious for

the two white oxen to draw.

Though the distance was no more than two hundred miles as the crow flies, the roads zigzagged from town to town increasing the distance almost by half again. From York they would travel more west than south to Leeds where they expected to join an even larger group.

From the day he had discovered the source of the commission, Brian had grown more and more morose. The English king could not be ordering this huge supply of English weaponry unless he were planning war. And the war would most certainly be waged against France.

"You have made me a traitor," he snarled at Gil, when she inquired after his black mood. "You set me to making arrows to kill Frenchmen."

"I did not know that," she objected. "Nor do you."

"Hunting arrows indeed," he scoffed. "No wonder you looked at me so oddly when I made remarks about the game running away. An archer must shoot rapidly if he is to bring down a mounted knight before the destrier can trample him."

"I did not force you into my service," Gil reminded him. "You volunteered to pay what you considered to be a debt. I helped you freely. We all did. You know Uncle Tobin well enough now to realize his ways seem gruff, but he is a kind and generous man. He would not have turned you out."

Throwing her a hard look, Brian spurred his horse forward away from the plodding oxen. The more he thought of his labor, the angrier he became. He had been used to preparing weapons to kill his fellows. Furious at the thought, he ground his teeth to keep from roaring aloud. An old man and a girl had deceived him. He could not wreak his vengeance on the old bowyer, but the

young fletcher was another matter.

Leeds lay across the Ure. They would camp on the riverbank that night. A rider on a small punch hailed him, swinging a skin of wine. His expression more a sneer than a smile, Brian accepted the offering gratefully and joined the journeyman in a drink. The wine was almost gone to vinegar, but its bite pleased Brian. Trick him, would she. She would pay.

On the wagon seat the reins slack between her hands, Gillian stared at the unlovely rumps of the slow-moving oxen. Since leaving York, she had sunk deeper and deeper into a depression. The enormity of the task before her, the responsibility facing her when she returned to York, the fear for the life as well as the health of the only member of her family older than herself, all combined to drive her spirit into the dust.

She and she alone had to take the productivity of months over hundreds of miles. Once the bows and arrows were delivered, she would have to make arrangements with the Hansa agent for a letter of credit to transfer her gold to the Hansa agent in York. The letter of credit would be issued, of course, in exchange for a small percentage of the amount, but at least the payment would not be stolen from her on the homeward trip. Indeed, if some catastrophe should befall her, Uncle Tobin could go to the agent in York and eventually, after much difficulty, receive the gold.

Her real depression came from the realization that Gillian Fletcher would have to die. She could not tell why she felt as she did. Kenneth had declared that he wanted to be a bowyer. She could give up fletching. She could

marry and have a family. Perhaps her husband, if he were a good craftsman, would allow her to continue her trade. That another would *allow* her to continue her trade rankled. She had been independent too long. Angrily, she acknowledged that she would bitterly resent anyone who tried to tell her what to do.

Glumly, she recalled her haughty replies when Brian had suggested that she give up her trade and assume women's garments again. Yet her very soul cringed at the thought of abandoning her sex forever. To burn the carefully braided hair with which she preserved her disguise; to bury the last two dresses. To live alone without love.

She did not fool herself. No one could ever come near her again. Not close enough to touch her. If someone touched her as Brian had done, she would be discovered. She could have neither husband nor wife. She would never know the sweet breath of a kiss, the soft caress of a hand. A frisson terribly akin to pain slipped down her spine, coiling itself into her belly. She wanted . . .

A wicked thought tickled her mind. She was twenty-five years old. Much too old to marry anyway. No one would want such an old maid. In an age when girls married at thirteen or fourteen, were mothers at fifteen and grandmothers at thirty, she was considered ancient. What matter her precious virginity!

Brian de Trenanay desired her. She had felt his hardness against her body, had felt her own stirrings in response. He was a knight; she, a lady. Perhaps not exactly a lady, but certainly a female. She was a *burgesse*, not too low for him to notice her.

No, a voice whispered in her mind. No. You will pay a high price for such folly.

Her hands clenched on the reins. She sat straighter on



the wagon seat.

Yes! another voice thundered. Yes. You will never have another chance to taste the pleasure.

She looked around furtively, almost expecting to see the Devil himself as portrayed in the paintings on the front of the church altar. She shivered as with a sudden chill and clamped her teeth together to prevent their chattering. Did she dare? What if there was no pleasure, only pain?

Snatches of conversation overheard between servants, particularly maids, flitted through her mind. Tales of appalling deflorations accompanied by the most earnest entreaties and pleas for mercy. Horror stories of babes conceived without the sacred vows of wedlock.

'Twould be a horrible thing to conceive a child, but she had told so many lies that her fertile mind immediately leaped ahead to plan how such a child's birth could be explained. She smiled at the thought. Perhaps that would be the greatest pleasure of all. Brian de Trenanay was virile and strong. Surely his child would be too. She could have a son of her very own, or a daughter, although she hoped that she would not conceive such a worthless thing. The world was a hard place for daughters.

The day suddenly seemed brighter. She looked around her. The oxen crested the rise up which they had plodded. Below her lay the Ure. Lined up for some distance were the wagons of other craftsmen waiting to cross on the ferry.

Casting a knowledgeable eye at the setting sun, she reckoned that she and Brian would find a night's lodging at the huge inn built on the Leeds' side of the river. Brian, being only one person, could cross early and make arrangements for their bed and stabling. When she

arrived, all would be in readiness.

He rode toward her even as she thought. How beautiful and tall he sat his destrier, the sun gilding his sandy hair, turning it to a cap of spun gold. She drew in her breath at the sight.

His anger had dissolved into a sullen black mood which sat on his frowning brow. The sight of her welcoming smile elicited only a slight sneer.

Doubtfully, she stared at him. "Is something the matter, Brian?"

He waved a gloved hand at her in the manner of a man brushing away an annoying fly. Resting the other hand on the pommel of the saddle, he hunched his shoulders and waited.

She hesitated, then shrugged. "May I suggest that you cross with one of the early loads? You could bespeak us a room at the inn as well as stable for our cattle."

One sandy eyebrow rose at the mention of a room. He swayed slightly in the saddle. Something very like a smirk flitted across his face. "Your wish is my command, my la—lad," he slurred. "Room at the inn."

As he wheeled the horse, she called after him, "Bespeak a bath as well, Brian, if such be to be had."

He waved to her to show that he had heard.

She stared reflectively after him. Evidently, he had been sharing some spirits along the way with some other men. She wrinkled her nose ruefully. He had been a sober enough man during his stay in York. Possibly he had indulged himself a bit in celebration of his being free of his labor. Settling down on the wagon seat, she prepared to wait as, one after another, the wagons crawled forward to the ferry.

Assuming a place on the next boat across, Brian dis-

mounted and held his horse's head as he stared back at the line of wagons. He could pick her wagon easily. 'Twould be more than an hour before she could be able to cross. He chuckled to himself. Anticipation of the evening set his blood tingling. She would . . . she would . . . He shook his head. Damn! He was drunk!

Drunk would never do. He should be alert and in full possession of his faculties. He wanted to enjoy this night. A night to remember. He had never bedded a burgesse before. Furthermore, he had never bedded a virgin, and she was undoubtedly a virgin. The deceitful creature! He shook his head, staring hard at the retreating shore with its line of wagons. Near the brow of the hill stood the white oxen, small in the brown road and green fields. The figure on the wagon seat was only a doll.

The Black Ox did a thriving business being the best resting place between Leeds and York. Above the door were carved the words, "Dame, God be here. Fellow, ye be welcome." Brian ducked his head and entered.

"Surely an upper room may be rented for the night. The meal will be served in the common room throughout the evening. A bath . . ." Here the innkeeper stroked his chin gravely and made as if to shake his head.

Meaningfully Brian jingled the purse at his belt.

"Perhaps a small hipbath . . ." the man began.

The knight withdrew a pair of silver coins.

"I can send a servant immediately."

"And when my brother arrives with the wagon, he will require one too."

"Your brother! . . . God'amercy! With all the business and meals to prepare . . ."

A third coin gleamed in the broad hand.

The innkeeper bowed low. "When your brother

arrives, one of the lads will bring up fresh hot water and towels."

"'Tis well," Brian nodded smoothly. "We will eat in the common room and the price of the meal will be added to the morrow's reckoning with what small gratuity as befits your service. I shall bathe now." He dropped the coins into the man's outstretched hand.

The room was so small that the hipbath could barely fit between the end of the bed and the window. Likewise, Brian's body was too broad to sit comfortably in it. He contented himself with ladling the warm water over himself and scrubbing himself with the cloth provided. A small copper coin bought him a bottle of wine and two glasses. Dressing himself again, he poured himself a sip and sat down to wait.

As the light of day faded behind the small diamond-shaped panes, the latch lifted. "Brian?"

"Here, Gil," he called from his reclining position on the bed. He could see her silhouette in the door. The long slender legs in the black hose, the scarlet smock reaching to mid thigh, belted loosely around her hips and allowed to blouse over to conceal the breasts that he knew lay beneath it.

Behind her a lantern wavered. "'Tis your room, sir," came a bored voice. "Please to rest yourself. Your bath will be up directly as your older brother bespoke."

"May I have the light?" she asked.

For answer the lackey preceded her into the room, raising the hood on the lantern and lighting the candle on the small stand beside the bed. "I be right back, sir."

Standing in the tiny room, only a couple of feet from the bed, Gillian felt a tightening in the muscles of her stomach as her eyes traveled Brian's length from the foot

of the bed to the head.

Hands cupped behind his head, he smiled at her warmly. "Your room, my lady, with bath."

Alarmed, she laid her finger to her lips. "Be careful, Brian. Call me Gil please. The walls of the inn might be thin. Someone might overhear who could do me harm."

Half-closing his eyes, he nodded in seeming bored agreement. "Oh, indeed, Gil. 'Twould not do for you to be harmed."

Faintly puzzled by his attitude, she gazed around her curiously. She had never been in an inn before. "This seems comfortable," she began tentatively, taking the steps necessary to bring her to the bed and pressing down on it with her fingertips. "Is the bed comfortable?"

"Very," he grinned. "Although a bit short. We shall not be too crowded."

She did not protest. They were lucky to have a room to themselves. To sleep with many men in the common upper room might reveal her identity. Nervously, she jumped back at the knock at the door.

"Your bath," Brian remarked lazily. "Enter," he called.

The servitor brought two kettles of hot water and a towel. Shaking his head at this excess of cleanliness, he departed.

Gillian stared at the hipbath at the end of the bed, then at Brian. "Will you not leave, my lord?"

"No, Gil. After all, I am your brother. My leaving might arouse suspicion."

## *Chapter Nine*

Brian spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone that, for a full minute, Gillian gazed at him open-mouthed. Then she shook her head in disbelief. Surely, she had misunderstood. Blinking rapidly, she tried again. "I am very tired and very dirty, my lord. Please leave off your jest."

Grinning like a very devil, he propped himself up on one elbow and made a sweeping gesture with his free hand. "Your bath awaits, Brother Gil. Strip down and have at it. I have already bathed. 'Twas most pleasant, I freely admit." He rolled back against the spread with his head braced against the board. "I have never bathed so much in my life as with you Fletchers. I never thought to enjoy such a thing. But, damn, if more and more I do not feel the need. Some would say 'tis a curst habit. Today was such a time. Dusty . . ." He mused on, chuckling to himself.

Gillian stared at him. He was teasing. He had to be. "Please, Brian," she said evenly. "Leave off. I am so tired. My water is getting cool."

"Then use it," he urged.

Gillian moved to the end of the bed which sat on a pedestal with curtains on all four sides. If she drew the curtains over the end, she would be screened from his view, she supposed. But he *was* teasing her. No one would know or care whether her "older brother" stayed or went while she bathed.

Giving him an angry glare, she jerked the end curtains closed and emptied one pitcher into the hipbath. The water was only lukewarm when she tested it, but it would feel like heaven to her weary body. Peeking around the edge of the bed, she ascertained that he lay as she had left him. With his wine in his hand, he toasted her as he reclined smiling on the spread.

She made a face at him before ducking back behind the curtain and unbuckling her belt. In quick order she stripped off her boots, hose, and smock, laying them aside to redon when she and Brian went to dinner. Naked, she paused to listen for any sounds on the other side of the curtain.

None came.

Eagerly, she stepped into the tub and sat down. The water rose to her waist. Briskly, she splashed her chest and shoulders. Palming her breasts, she washed them and then her underarms. She was cupping water in her two hands to rinse down her back when his voice froze her.

"Care to have me wash that for you?"

He was grinning at her from the end of the bed. The curtains had been parted, and he lounged at his ease regarding her.

Her reaction was lightning fast. She flung the water at his mocking face. While he was cursing and mopping at his eyes, she stood up and reached for the linen towel. Unfortunately, it was not where she had left it. Looking around wildly, she spied it draped over the end of the bed under his elbow. When she dived for it, he held on tightly.

"Oh, no," he snorted, shaking the drops of water from his hair and jerking the towel out of her fingers. "Not tonight, mistress. We have a little score to settle. I paid my debt. Now you pay yours."

Splashing water over the floor, she caught up her smock and held it in front of her. "What are you talking about?"

He chuckled at her predicament, staring pointedly at her long legs and the slender curve of her hip left unconcealed by the inadequate drapery. As he stared, he observed with satisfaction the blush that rose from her throat and suffused her cheeks. This evening promised to be a night to remember. His body stirred and tightened as he contemplated it. No sense making her resentful. Women liked to believe they were loved for themselves alone. Or for their irresistible beauty and fascination. He allowed his eyes to rove over her body, so tantalizingly half revealed.

"Why the debt you have incurred with your beauty, Mistress Gillian."

She snorted, a sound perfectly in keeping with the part she had played. "I am surprised that you can tell such lies with a straight face, Sir Brian. Even more surprised that God does not send a lightning bolt to strike you dead."

Still grinning, Brian swung his legs over the end of the bed allowing them to dangle apart. His hands he spread



wide. "I do not lie, sweetheart. God knows the truth when He hears it."

"Stay away!" she cried, stepping out of the tub and trying to back away. The small room confined her retreat to only a couple of paces. Water dripped off her body and pooled around her feet.

He stared at it, pointedly noting as he did so that her toes curled most delightfully.

Following the line of his vision, she girlishly lifted one foot and placed it around the back of the other. "Please, Brian, stop this jesting," she begged. "'Tis not decent. 'Tis broad daylight."

He raised both eyebrows with an accompanying shrug. "So!"

"Well . . . so . . . so . . . you should not see me."

He hoisted himself over the end of the bed and stretched to his full height, flexing his shoulders and drawing a deep breath. "But it gives me pleasure to see you." His voice deepened. He moved toward her, side-stepping the tub. "Your slender white feet, your delicate ankles." Another step.

Wildly, she pressed back against the wall. He was moving too fast. Her daydream had not taken this turn. Indeed, beyond a chaste kiss after which he hugged her to him, she had only a hazy idea of what would follow. Certainly, it all would be conducted in the dark. As far as she knew, everyone made love at night, in the dark, after they went to bed. She told him so.

"Please, Sir Brian. You should wait for nightfall."

"Your softly curving hip, your smooth shoulder . . ." His hand cupped warmly over the portion of her body he described.

At his touch she gasped and closed her eyes. A shiver

ran through her body as his masculinity towered over and encompassed her.

"... the velvet column of your throat..." His other hand slid along the skin above her collarbone until it closed around her neck, his thumb pressing into the hollow at its base. His index finger caressed the spot behind her earlobe while his other fingers slid into her close-cropped blond waves.

"... please..." Her voice was a tiny whisper of sound. She caught her lip between her teeth as if to bite back the word.

"... so made for a man's kiss..." His lips trailed down the other side of her neck where he felt the pulse leap wildly. The hand on her shoulder closed over the smock and drew it away. Purposefully, he moved forward, his legs almost straddling hers. The wool of his tunic pressed against her nude length. Deliberately, he moved back and forth to tantalize her nipples with its roughness.

Twisting against him, she moaned. His lips continued their soft punishment of her flesh, pulling back from his teeth, to allow them to also nip her.

"Brian... oh, Brian... please... I beg you..."

For long minutes the only sound in the room was the muffled breathing of two bodies punctuated by deep groans of pleasure and tiny gasps for mercy.

At length, it was he who broke the embrace. Stepping away from her, heady with his own success, he held her at arm's length. Surveying her blushing form, he drew a deep, if somewhat agonized, breath of satisfaction. Her nipples bloomed like painfully distended rosebuds. The pale pink aureoles also appeared swollen as if the abrasive wool had stimulated them almost beyond bearing.

Despite his resolve to wait, thus tormenting her further, he touched one with fingers that surprised him by their trembling.

Tantalizingly, he rolled the hardened nub between his thumb and third finger. The soft flesh of her belly jumped and quivered. She shifted from one foot to the other.

Keeping his thumb and finger at their work, he began to pat her dry with the linen towel he had draped across his shoulder. In that manner his hand covered her body, touched places never touched by a man before. In particular the tops of her thighs and the dark blond curls that covered her mount of pleasure received his loving ministrations.

When at last he was satisfied, she leaned helplessly against the wall, erotic tremors coursing through her body, her breasts hard, her lips parted by each sighing breath.

"Now," he said softly. "You will want to dress yourself so we may go down and eat."

Her eyelids flickered as if she awoke from some beautiful dream. Grinning at her, he bent for her smock. "Raise your arms," he commanded. When she did so, he could not forbear a soft kiss on each breast as her movement lifted them to him.

"B-But, Brian? . . ." Her voice was muffled within the folds as he slipped the garment over her head.

"'Tis what you wanted, Mistress Gillian," he reminded her, the corners of his mouth twitching with amusement. "Dress yourself." He had to place his hand under her elbow to guide her to the bed, so unsteady was she on her feet. While he watched her, lounging at his ease against the door, his arms crossed upon his chest, she sat down

on the edge of the bed to pull on her hose and boots.

As she reached for her belt, he straightened suddenly. Pulling his purse from beneath his tunic, he poured its contents out into his hand. In a moment he came toward her, a chain with a medallion dangling from his fingers.

"Here," he said softly. "This will help you to remember where we are and what we are about." He slipped the chain over her head, and directed the medallion to slide down under her smock. At the same time, he lifted her clothing and adjusted it between her breasts.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"It is my motto," he explained. "I do not give it to you, you understand. It is mine. I wanted you to think of us while you ate. It is just a simple gold-enameled symbol, not particularly valuable." His look pierced her. Did he think she would steal it?

"What is your motto?"

"It is *Mucro Mors Cristo*. My great grandfather earned it as a Crusader. It means, 'The swordpoint is death on behalf of Christ.'" For an instant his eyes were sober.

She looked up at him solemnly. "Then I shall be extra careful."

He snorted. "You will be always at my side." His sober mood vanished. He hugged her against him. "Come."

Together they went down the rough staircase, she following behind him respectfully as a younger brother should. Across the board from each other, his knee nudged hers apart and inserted itself between.

Their food, round loaves of bread hollowed out and filled with a stew of fish and vegetables, was set before them on pewter plate. The top of the loaf was to be used as a scoop to carry bites to the mouth. No eating utensils

were provided, since everyone carried his own knife. Indeed some people carried their own food with them and merely paid a small charge for the innkeeper to prepare it. Pewter tankards of foaming ale were also carelessly set before them.

Gillian's hunger began to stir as she plucked the crust from the top of the loaf. Brian allowed her a few bites before nudging her with his knee. When she looked up, his eyes were smoky with desire. "Touch the medallion, Gil," he commanded.

The food stuck in her throat. Obediently, her fingers fumbled for the metal disk where it swung between her breasts beneath the cloth.

The inn was dark and smoky, crowded with noisy people. No one looked in their direction. They sat at the end of the table farthest from the kitchen and the fire.

"No," he commanded, his voice gruff. "Reach under your smock and touch it."

A blush rose in her throat. Her eyes shifted from side to side to see if they were observed.

"Do it, Gil."

Hesitantly, her hand stole under her smock sliding up between her breasts to grasp the warm gold. She swallowed.

"Are you touching it?" he asked, the gold flecks in his eyes glittering.

"Yes." Her voice was a hiss.

"Is it warm?"

"Yes."

His knee nudged hers. "Now rub it across the tip of your breast."

Her face turned crimson. She gasped as if she had been stabbed. "I cannot."

"You must. It is my command. I want to see you remember what we are going to do when we go back upstairs. I would not like for you to forget while we are eating."

As he stared at the agonized face across from him, his thoughts flashed back in time to the *comtesse* who had taught him the joy and agony of anticipation. It was almost his first bout of love. She had tortured him for hours, teasing him with her body and her voice until he thought he would burst. When at last he had been admitted to her bedchamber, she had made him wait again while she undressed, slowly and seductively baring each silken limb to his tormented eyes. The wait had been worth every anguished moment. When he had driven into her, she had screamed with pleasure, and he had exploded again and again, draining himself but almost collapsing with pleasure.

So it would be tonight. Although a virgin, Gillian was a mature woman, an unusual combination. She should be able to take everything he had to give with joy. He remembered her long strong legs. They would wrap around him tightly.

Her eyes were closed as her hand moved under the smock.

"Do you remember?" he asked softly.

"Yes. I remember."

"Take your hand away," he ordered, taking a long drink of ale.

Gillian could eat nothing else. Wordlessly, she stared at him as he finished his meal with relish and polished off the contents of the tankard. He puzzled her. How could he eat as if nothing had happened? Her body had never felt less like food. It tingled and spasmed. Blood pounded

through her veins; her breath hissed through her lungs. She felt a strange warmth and moisture between her legs. Surreptitiously, she shifted in her seat; but when she attempted to close her thighs, Brian's knee prevented her.

"No." He smiled silkily. "Keep yourself open for me."

Frightened at the intensity of her responses, she hung her head. Surely, everyone in the room must be watching them by now.

"Eat your dinner," was the next command.

She shook her head. "I am no longer hungry."

He nodded. "Then are you ready to go upstairs with me?"

She drew a deep shivering breath. She could not think. If he had told her to hold her hand in fire, she felt she would have done so. She tried again unsuccessfully to press her knees together.

He grinned. "How tightly you clasp me, Gil! Will you clasp me as tightly tonight?" He motioned to the servant. "Bring me the accounting and take another couple of tankards of ale to our room." He tossed a coin onto the table in payment for the service.

Chills sliding over her body, she waited until he was ready to rise. "Now, Gil," he said mockingly, releasing her knee as he did so.

She could scarcely stand.

"You foolish young one," he chided for those around him to hear. "He drinks too much, then rises dizzy. He will have a large head on him in the morning."

One man nodded in agreement, but the rest ignored the statement, intent only on filling their bellies before getting to their beds.

Brian flung an arm around her shoulder, his hand

slipping under her arm so the fingers could touch the edge of her breast. He pressed firmly against its swell. The servitor preceded them with the tankards of ale. They mounted the stairs; he, strong and ready; she, weak and breathless.

Once inside the room with the door closed behind them, he swept her up in his arms, cradling her and enclosing her in his warmth. "Oh, mistress," he crooned. "We will have a wondrous loving tonight."

Bearing her to the bed, he set her down on it and began lovingly to undress her. With each garment, he kissed her skin, commenting on its whiteness, its velvety softness. "Like damask," he vowed, running his fingers across the surface of her belly. "A pearl-like sheen to be sure. Gillian, you are as beautiful as any lady in the court of France." Stretching her out in nude splendor, he ran his hands over her body before stepping back to divest himself of his clothing.

The medallion glowed softly in the candlelight as her agitated breathing caused her chest to rise and fall. Fearful and shy, she kept her eyes closed.

"Come, Gillian," he whispered, lifting one knee to the bed beside her. "Look at me," he repeated sternly.

He was a remarkable man. Although not overly tall, his hours of training and strenuous exercise had developed his shoulders and chest to an extraordinary degree. Likewise his horseman's thighs were columns of power. The sandy hair on his chest and body had not bleached in the sun. It was therefore darker and silky fine. From out of a thatch of dark curls sprang his engorged manhood.

At the sight of its length and breadth, she gasped in fear. Horrified, she flung her hand across her eyes.

He chuckled gently. "Now, now, sweetheart. None of



that. 'Tis not so very big. You are made to take all of it, you know."

Trembling, she shook her head.

"Oh, yes." He sat down beside her, his fingers playing in her blond fleece, causing her to squirm slightly. "Oh, yes," he assured her. "Think for a minute. You are a tall, strong girl. God made you for the pleasure of men as He made all women. He would not make a mistake. You are just right."

So talking to her as he would a child, he found the tip of her pleasure where it hid in the joining of her thighs. Pressing it in until she gasped, then coaxing it back out again, he watched the play of sensations across her face. Dipping his fingers lower, he trailed one up and down her moist entrance before sliding it into the hot darkness.

His own need was becoming painful. He must have her very soon. He closed his eyes, struggling for control, biting his lip to maintain it.

Her breasts trembled with each agitated breath she drew.

"Sweetheart, Gillian," he whispered, stretching his body beside hers without taking his hand away. The fingers of his other hand sought the nipple of her left breast, squeezing it firmly. "Do you feel feverish and impatient?"

He could see her throat contract as she swallowed. "Yes . . ."

He moved his finger deeper into her body until he encountered her maidenhead. So that was what it felt like. Such a tiny insignificant thing. His finger stirred to find its tiny opening. "Do you ache inside?"

She drew one leg up reflexively. "Yes . . . Oh, yes . . ."

"Sweetheart, I feel the same. Put your hand on me."

Timidly her fingers touched his hip, his thigh, fumbled briefly, then found his hardened shaft.

"It is hot and aching for you," he explained. As he spoke, he pressed against the edges of the tiny hole in the membrane. Beneath his touch it began to open.

She gasped at the intrusion, but excitement not pain made her writhe her body. One hand closed over him while the other grasped the spread beneath her.

"Are you ready, sweetheart?"

"Yes . . . Oh! . . ."

At her word he heaved himself over her. His finger pushed aside the veil and buried in her moist depth.

Almost sobbing in his effort to control himself, he withdrew and placed himself at her entrance. With a groan, he bent to her.

## *Chapter Ten*

Fearful of the steely strength she saw there, Gillian stared into Brian's face only short inches from her own. His square jaw clenched; his eyes slitted. She felt him at the entrance to her body, touching, probing, entering her the tiniest bit. She had heard that the first time was painful for a woman. Willing herself to endure, she closed her eyes.

"Look at me," he gritted between his clenched teeth.

Obediently, she opened her eyes.

He slipped one strong hand around her neck caressing the point of her shoulder; the other, he laid warm on her hip. "There is naught to fear," he whispered hoarsely.

She cried out more in surprise than pain as he began to slide himself into her.

"Easy," he soothed. "I will be slow. Relax. Easy. Put your arms around me." His thumb rubbed back and forth

on her belly beside her hipbone.

"Brian," she gasped. "You are so big. How can I? . . ."

"Ssh. A bit at a time."

As she began to stretch, she could feel him slide deeper into her. Just when she thought she could take no more, when discomfort seemed to be about to turn to pain, he stopped. Beneath her hands that clasped his back along his ribs, she could feel his muscles bunch and tremble. He drew a deep breath.

Deep within her, nerves quivered and ached. Why did he remain still? She felt that he should move. Unconsciously, she twisted her hips. When he felt her movement, he released his breath in a sigh.

"What do you want, Sweet Gillian? Show me."

For answer she lifted her hips, thrusting them upward against him.

His smile was loving. "Do you truly, sweetheart?" He pulled himself out, then slid back in a bit farther this time.

She sighed. The sensation was not exactly pleasant, yet she wanted him to continue. Perhaps if she edged her body slightly to the left? No. Perhaps to the right?

He swore breathlessly against her neck. His hot breath burned the point between her neck and shoulder. "Sweet Jesus!" he exclaimed. "Are you sure you were a virgin?"

Affronted, she stiffened beneath him.

"Oh, no, Gillian. Ah, no, *chérie*. I did not mean to offend. I found your maidenhead with my own hand before. . . . I only meant . . . you are so . . . so . . . wonderful. Never have I . . . Never has a woman . . ." He began to move faster, pulling himself out and thrusting into her with long steady strokes.

His movements became more and more pleasant. She

quickly found that if she pressed herself up as he came down, she could drive him deeper, thus heightening the sensation. Now a wild excitement began to build within her. She felt as if something were about to happen. She clenched her teeth, determining to experience whatever . . .

Above her, Brian cried out. At the same time his hard shaft pushed deeper into her than he had ever gone.

Almost she . . . what?

Then he collapsed upon her, sweat plastering his chest to mingle with her own.

She waited. To her dismay he did nothing else. Instead, she could feel the shaft within her softening, sliding out of her. Angrily, she clenched her buttocks. She wanted him to stay in her and continue. "Brian!"

His response was a muffled groan.

She hugged him hard against her, but despite her efforts, she was empty. Had she experienced all there was to love-making? No wonder some women complained bitterly. She felt like complaining bitterly herself. She felt angry and excited and agitated and disappointed all at once. "Brian!"

As if he moved with great weariness, he eased his body to the side and rolled off onto his back. His eyes were closed; his mouth, open as he sighed gustily.

Lying beside him, her legs parted, her arms fallen back from his body, she felt foolish. Was this all there was to romantic love? It was nothing like the sweet songs of the minstrels. How could anyone get excited about it? Certainly, Brian reacted now as if he were exhausted. How could anyone find excitement in it? Of course, for a short time she had felt excited just before he had cried out and collapsed.

She shrugged her shoulders irritably. The church taught that the only function of that part of marriage was the conception of children. She supposed that Brian, being a Christian knight, had felt a duty. But how could that be when they were not married? If a child were conceived by their act, it would be a child of sin. Steps would have to be taken to conceal its true birth and legitimize it, so it could grow up in a proper family. No. He must have done that act for some other reason that she did not understand.

The candle guttered in the holder. Even though she was tired from the long drive, she felt strangely nervous. Unlike herself. Turning over on her side, she punched the bolster on the bed and pulled the cover around her shoulders. To her surprise she felt Brian cast his arm over her to draw her into the circle of his body.

Although she stiffened resentfully, he refused to let her alone. Inexorably he drew her in against him, fitted the curve of her hips into his own, drew his thighs up under hers, and cupped his hand around her breast.

"Go to sleep, sweetheart," he whispered drowsily, his lips brushing her ear with a kiss. "Tomorrow morning before we leave, you will have your pleasure too. I swear. Now sleep."

Long she lay staring into the darkness with his even breath warming her neck. Pleasure. Somehow she doubted that she would ever find much pleasure from the act they had just engaged in.

Gillian awoke before Brian. The paleness of early dawn seeped dimly in through the leaded glass. Below in the inn yard she could hear a few stirrings of ostlers and

guests getting an early start. The odor of baking bread seeped through the floorboards. Suddenly, she was ravenously hungry.

Gingerly, she moved Brian's arm aside before slipping from the bed. He moaned faintly, rolled over on his back, but settled back into sleep. The medallion dangled between her breasts, striking her as she bent over to draw on her hose.

Pausing, she carried it to the window and stared at it in the strengthening light. It was a beautiful thing. Heavy warm gold, polished from constant contact with his skin, she supposed. The center was a flowering vine entwined about a sword. Around the outside of the symbol was a circlet of blue enamel with the letters of his motto raised in gold. *Mucro Mors Cristo*. She remembered well the feelings this simple object had inspired. A warm flush stained her cheeks and she stirred uneasily. In the faint dawn chill of the room she could feel her nipples harden.

Hastily, she slipped on her smock, belting it firmly around her lean waist and blousing it so that no one could even suspect that her breasts lay beneath it. She ran her fingers through her hair, fitted her cap on her head, and glanced at the sleeping man. He had not moved.

Her stomach growled noisily. Making a face in his direction, she lifted the latch and slipped out into the hallway.

Below in the dining room all was chaos. Anxious to be on their way so as to cover the most distance before nightfall, guests waited impatiently for their morning meals. Servants of both sexes and all ages dashed madly about trying unsuccessfully to provide breakfasts for the noisy throng.

Dropping down at the end of bench, Gillian reached for

the remaining small loaf of fresh-baked bread on the serving plate. The merchant whose hand had already started in that direction scowled darkly. With the cheekiness of a cocky youth, she rolled her eyes at him as she bit into the first food she had really tasted since she and Brian had pulled out of York.

While Gillian munched the roll, a heavy-breasted slattern, sweating from every pore, swept the refuse from the planking with a grimy cloth and slopped down a tureen of steaming groats with bits of pork stirred in. A lackey followed her with a fresh plate of bread. Everybody at the table fell to with alacrity.

Knives sliced the tops off the small loaves and the steaming food was then ladled into the hollow in the bread. Using the sliced off top as a scoop, the men ate until the top was consumed, then tore the bread into soaked chunks and devoured them too. Within minutes some began to leave the table, paying their scores to the innkeeper standing at the door with his lists in his fat hand.

Halfway through her breakfast, Gillian spotted Brian standing at the door, looking around the room. Waving a friendly hand, she caught his attention.

Scowling blackly, he strode in her direction. "You were supposed to remain in the room," he began without preamble.

"Oh, was I?" Gillian's pansy brown eyes widened guiltlessly.

Brian dropped down beside her, his mouth at her ear. "I promised you more," he hissed meaningfully.

"More of that." Gillian made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "I did not really want any more. I thought it too much trouble for nothing that I could see."



*"Too much trouble!"* Brian's roar turned heads at three tables in both directions. He glanced around him angrily as a red flush mounted into his cheeks. *"Too much trouble!"* he hissed, lowering his voice. *"Just because you knew nothing at all about anything. That,"* he informed her loftily, *"is a skill. You have to practice it. It takes many times to get it right."*

*"Too much trouble for what it was worth!"* Gillian popped the last bite of her bread and groats into her mouth and reached for the tankard of ale.

Brian's mouth dropped open, then snapped to like a trap. His eyes narrowed. He laid a heavy hand on her forearm. *"You were excited, eager,"* he muttered. *"I have never felt . . . What do you mean . . . 'for what it was worth'?"*

She glanced at the heavy hand on her, then at the face scowling incredulously down at her. *"All that excitement and upset . . . and . . . work, on your part, that is, and nothing. Nothing happened."* She smiled at him as if she were speaking with a somewhat spoiled child. *"You strained and labored until you collapsed. Then you went to sleep."*

*"But . . . But . . ."*

*"You were tired already,"* she went on reasonably. *"I was too. How much better we would have both felt if we could have just lain down comfortably together and gone to sleep."*

So angry that he could not speak, he stared at her. A feeling of inadequacy plagued him. He had been tired. He had not taken the trouble to please her. He had settled down to sleep with merely the promise of some nebulous pleasure in the morning. But, damn her! She was a woman. Women were supposed to be reticent. Not com-

plaining and criticizing. How dare she?

All around them travelers were settling for food and lodgings and leaving. "We must be gone," Gillian said practically. "You break your fast and pay the reckoning. I will yoke the oxen and start out. You can easily catch up to me on your horse. That way I will not be so far back in line at the next ferry." Shaking free of his now limp hand, she took a last drink of the ale and rose. Setting her cap more firmly on her fair hair, she was gone.

Brian stared after her, the angry flush fading from his countenance. Several thoughts, none of them particularly pleasant, whirled round in his mind. Uppermost was the memory that he had settled himself for sleep almost immediately after he had rolled from her panting body. With growing shame he remembered her excitement. He could hear the agitation, the frustration in her voice. "Brian!"

The same slatternly woman set a tankard of ale down in front of him. "Y'r young friend be not leavin' without payin' the reck'nin'?"

"I will pay," Brian remarked absently.

"He be a fair 'un," she continued, staring across the room where Gillian walked out the door.

Brian grinned wryly. "A fair one indeed," he agreed.

"Pity ye came in so late last night," she remarked, placing her greasy hands under her sagging bosom and heaving. "Many young 'uns like a nice mature type. Gentle, y' know."

Brian stared at the huge udders thrust into his face. "I doubt that Gil would have had the stamina, mistress. He was exhausted from the long drive from York. Went right to bed."

"How about y'rself? When y' come back through, be

not forgettin' Meg." She leered at him revealing a broken tooth in her lower jaw.

"I shall remember." He took a long drink of ale before reaching for the loaf of bread.

As the creature turned away, Brian felt suddenly tired. Although his moments of ecstasy with Gillian had been sublimely satisfying, the morning after at this sordid inn seemed a repetition of too many nights and too many days. He stared disgustedly at the breakfast loaf with now-cooled and congealed groats mounded in the center. The grease from the pork had begun to harden on the rough surface.

He swallowed; his stomach threatened to turn. Looking away, his gaze encountered the broad retreating hips trembling and quaking beneath their soiled and spotted skirt. He could not eat.

Pushing back the bench, he rose, the smoky odoriferous atmosphere assaulting his nostrils. No different from other inns from the Scottish border to the plains of Provence, it sickened him as never before. Paying the reckoning including the price of his own uneaten meal to the amazed innkeeper, he thrust himself out into the foggy morning air.

Gil jumped in surprise, dropping the heavy yoke she had hoisted half off the ground. "Brian! Did you finish your meal? What? . . ."

Growling an unintelligible reply, he caught up the heavy yoke effortlessly and settled it over the necks of the placid white beasts. With efficient movements, he harnessed them to the wagon tongue, slamming the iron pin into place with unnecessary force.

Brown eyes wide, Gil stared at him. "Thank you," she murmured, climbing onto the wagon seat and lifting

the reins.

"Slide over," came the curt command. Before she could protest, Brian was gone, returning moments later with his horse which he hitched to the back of the wagon. The heavy saddle and trappings, he flung into the back on top of the cargo.

Obediently, she slid over, surprised and not a little pleased by the company. Her arms felt sore and strained from hauling on the reins yesterday. If he drove even for a couple of hours today, his strength would save her much. The road to London stretched long before her.

She sighed with relief as she leaned back against the wagon seat and flexed her fingers. "I never thought to ask you to take this trouble," she began pleasantly. "But I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And my shoulders and hands thank you, too."

His eyes slid sideways as he cracked the whip above their heads and clucked his tongue loudly. "My horse needs a rest," he responded laconically as the wagon creaked forward protestingly.

The day did not clear. Instead, the skies thickened as first a light mist and then a drizzle began to fall. The ancient roadbed fast turned into a quagmire. The oxen strained mightily against the yoke to keep the heavy-laden wagon moving. Finally, the wagon ahead of them bogged down completely. If they had stopped, the oxen would have been unable to start the load again.

Cursing, Brian thrust the reins into Gil's cold, wet hands and sprang down from the seat. "Keep them moving!" he yelled dashing for their heads to turn them aside before their momentum could be slowed. Mouthing imprecations against the ancestry of the driver of the team ahead of them, Brian slid and stumbled to the beast

on the left, dragging its head aside and forcing its brother to follow. The wagon heaved over the ruts and out onto the verge.

Past the bogged wagon whose driver stood on the seat cracking his whip over the backs of his bawling team, Brian guided the dirty white oxen. His fine leather boots were coated with mud; his drenched tunic, plastered to his body.

Thunder rolled as above their heads the heavens opened up. Rain poured down in torrents with such force that the knight staggered. Throwing a swift glance over his shoulder, he saw that Gil had jumped from the wagon seat.

The girl was at the other ox's off side. Plodding along together the four made their laborious way. Past wagon after wagon they continued doggedly.

"If we can find somewhere to stop, we will," Brian yelled.

She nodded drearily in reply.

Behind them he heard the pounding of hooves. Brian cast a quick glance over his shoulder. A group of horsemen were coming up fast behind them. The heavy ironshod hooves kicked clods of mud over him. Angrily, he let go of the ox and turned to face them.

As one man rode by, his contemptuous glance fell on the struggling peasants. His eyes registered shock before he pulled his hood over his face. His countenance paled at the sight of Brian de Trenanay standing arms akimbo, a fearsome scowl on his muddy face.

Too late!

Brian's hazel eyes flashed fire. The Saxon squire!

With a yell, Brian sprang at the man's thigh seeking to bring him from the saddle. But the trained horse side-

stepped. Missing his hold altogether in the slippery footing, the knight fell, floundering face down in the mire.

"Ware, robbers!" the squire cried.

Instantly, several of the men with whom he rode drew sword.

As Brian scrambled to his hands and knees, the flat of a blade across his back sent him sprawling again. Mud caked his nose and eyes. Before he could rise, a point of steel pricked the back of his neck.

"Finish him." He heard the gruff command.

"No!" That was Gil's voice shrieking. Her hands closed over his shoulders. "No! He is my brother. He is simple. He does not know what he does. Sometimes the fit seizes him. . . ."

Her words were cut off by a sharp blow. "Silence! He attacked one of my men." The sword drew blood from his skin.

"No!" Her voice was calmer now. "He is only a poor 'prentice. He cannot even do the work of a journeyman although he is so big. See him."

The sword point came away. Her hands took hold of his shoulders and turned him over face up. Her face was directly above his, her eyes sharp with meaning to warn him. "Fool," she swore. "You have disturbed the gentlemen with your play. Apologize."

Realizing that death for both of them was only a stroke away, he nodded dumbly. So muddy was he by now that he resembled nothing human. The rain spattered his mud-caked features. Pretending dizziness he sat up, holding his head between his hands and grinning foolishly at the mounted men and the two who stood on either side of him, their swords drawn.

"Apologize," came Gil's sharp command.

Instead of speaking, Brian merely moaned and swayed foolishly back and forth.

"'Tis a trick." The squire insisted. "The man attacked me."

"You probably scared him," Gil insisted. "The thunder and rain have made him nervous. He has never been away from home before. He cried like a baby all night last night. Ate no breakfast this morning." She patted the knight's broad shoulder. "Tell the nice men how sorry you are," she said gently.

As if he pouted like a scolded child, Brian sat cross-legged as the rain beat down on his bare head. "Sorry," he said gruffly.

The sword point in his line of vision relaxed visibly.

"I tell you . . ."

"If you want to sit here in the rain all day arguing with a half-witted peasant," the commander growled, "so be it. Ride on." With a creak of leather and a jingle of spurs, the two who had dismounted sprang to their saddles. The horses churned mud, liberally spattering Brian and Gil where they crouched beside the oxen. The lightning crackled across the sky as the mounted troop galloped away.

## *Chapter Eleven*

When Brian would have stared after them, Gil's hand firmly pressed against his neck. "Keep your head down or lose it," she hissed.

Brian swore graphically. "'Twas the squire who stole my armor."

"So I guessed by the way you lunged for him." She straightened cautiously, looking warily in the direction the mounted men had taken. Their forms were barely visible in the driving rain. "You can rise now. They have gone."

Soaked to the skin and plastered with mud from head to foot, Brian rolled over onto his hands and knees. Moving as if the mud weighed him down, he climbed to his feet staggering slightly. The rain beat down on his bared head. He slid his hand around the back of his neck and stared at the blood staining his fingers.



"Are you badly cut?" she asked rising on tiptoe to try to see the wound.

With lips pressed tightly together, his eyes slitted against the driving rain, he shook his head. "'Tis a nick. I have had worse being shaved."

She shuddered as she turned away to mount to the wagon seat. "I thought he would kill you."

Without comment Brian strode to the end of the wagon where he dragged his gear from beneath the tarpaulin.

Gil knelt on the wagon seat, her hands doubled into fists. "Brian! What are you? . . ."

"That bastard stole my armor," he gritted, slinging the heavy saddle over the destrier's back. "He left me split open while some damned barber quacked over me. That swine will get it back for me, or . . ."

Gil curled her fingers around the board on which she knelt. "You cannot mean to ride after him. He had friends," she pointed out, striving for reason as the rain slashed across her face.

The entire scene began to take on the quality of a particularly horrifying nightmare. Lightning slashed down the sky striking somewhere close behind them with a crackle of sound and a brilliant flash of light. Brian whirled from his task in time to see the fireball rise into the air. The thunder broke directly over their heads with a deafening explosion.

"Get off that wagon!" he yelled, leaping for the seat as he did so. Cowering beneath the noise, Gil remained frozen. Roughly, he grasped her arm and dragged her over the side and down into the mud. "Under," he growled as another flash whitened the scene and was followed almost immediately by a thunderclap of such

volume that the ground seemed to tremble beneath them.

Flat in the mud beneath the wagon, they buried their faces in each other's shoulders and wrapped their arms around each other.

Again the lightning accompanied by the thunder! And again!

The destrier neighed in panic and reared. Its great weight broke the lead rope, and it whirled away into the rain.

"Damn!" Brian swore tiredly as he watched the great animal disappear within seconds. He flopped over onto his back, one arm still around the shuddering girl. Bitterly he stared at the mud-caked boards above him. This cursed country! Water poured off the sides of the wagon in sheets. Pray God the horse would not go far.

In silence they lay shivering miserably while the water pooled around and under their bodies. Gillian's throat began to ache as the cold and damp sank into her very bones. Almost weeping in her discomfort, she pressed herself harder against the knight's solid form. He seemed to her like a rock, oblivious to the elements. How grateful she was for his presence! Shuddering, she examined the prospect of his riding off after his former squire and leaving her to carry the commission to London.

He *must* stay with her. He *must*. "Brian."

He did not stir except to tighten his fingers around the point of her shoulder.

"Brian." The rain began to slacken slightly. The thunder rumbled farther off. "Brian," she whispered again. "You must not go after him. You will be killed. The man who commanded him . . . he could have ordered your death with the flick of his hand."

She felt Brian's body tense beside her. "When next we

meet, I will not be on my face in the mud." He made as if to roll from under the wagon. His arm slid roughly from under her shoulder.

"No." She caught at him. "The rain—"

"I doubt that I can get much wetter," he sneered.

"Fool! You—"

"Gillian." He turned to face her; their eyes were level in the increasing brightness signaling the end of the storm. Hard as jade, his gleamed out of an unsmiling countenance from which every vestige of emotion was erased. "I go for my armor. No knight could suffer the insult I have and allow it to go unpunished if he is a true knight. The thought of that filthy knave riding so high . . ." He ground his teeth in his desire for control. His temper overcame him. Furiously, he rolled from under the wagon and sprang to his feet.

The rain had slackened to a light drizzle. Raking a muddy hand through the dripping hair plastered to his forehead, he loped away in the direction the terrified destrier had taken.

It had not gone far. In less than a hundred yards it had halted in a small grove. He found it standing dejectedly, head down, back turned to the rain, a picture of equine misery. When he approached it cautiously, it did not raise its head and made no resistance when he caught up the dragging rope and vaulted onto its back.

Meanwhile, cursing savagely, water dripping from the tip of her nose, Gillian hauled at the yoke. The oxen hunched their shoulders and strained forward, but the wagon refused to move. The soft ground held it mired fast.

As Brian rode up, she threw him a vicious look before turning away to concentrate on the team. Stepping back,

she cracked the whip across their backs at the same time giving a yell that tore her already painful throat. The wagon inched forward with a sucking sound as the wheels eased upward out of the trough into which they had sunk.

Wildly elated, she cracked the whip again yelling even louder than before. The wagon lumbered forward as the oxen tossed their heads to settle the yoke more naturally on their shoulders.

Jubilant, she turned to mount to the seat only to behold Brian staggering away, his hand pressed to his side. He had thrown his shoulder against the wheel with all his strength. His herculean effort had dislodged the wagon. Instantly contrite, she dashed to his side, but he fended her off.

With a curse he flung his arm against her chest, causing her to slip to one knee on the muddy grass. "Keep them moving," he snarled as he straightened painfully. "For Sweet Jesus' sake, keep them moving, or it will all be to do over again."

Clumsily, she scrambled back yelling to the oxen as she did so. The placid beasts moved slowly, but steadily onward. Leaping onto the wagon seat, Gil gathered the reins and slapped them over the slick white backs.

Glancing behind her, she saw to her chagrin that Brian had pulled his saddle from the wagon and slung it onto the horse's back. Cinching it expertly, he mounted, favoring his left side as he did so.

"Brian!"

He held out his hand in a gesture to halt her arguments as he spurred the horse alongside. "Gillian, I *will* ride for Leeds. Do not gainsay me. Follow as you will with the wagon. I have made my pledge."

She shook her head. "Brian, you did not see the knight

with whom your squire rode. He was merciless. His face was absolutely impassive as he ordered his men to kill you."

"You need not fear for me on that score," Brian assured her. "He will regard me differently when he learns that I, too, am a knight."

"The commission," she reminded him, at the same time ashamed for her words but willing to try anything to keep him from undertaking a mission she feared would end in disaster for him.

He frowned. "You need not fear I will desert you. I will procure lodging for the night at the first available inn. If not the first on the way into town, then the second. Follow until you find the one."

She looked at him with agonized eyes. Her mouth opened to protest.

"Not a word," he commanded. "I have made you my pledge. I hold hard by my word, but I must and shall find that swine."

Shutting her mouth resignedly, she reached inside her soaked smock and withdrew the gold medallion. "Take this back then," she insisted. "It may help in some small way to convince that knight you do not lie."

Nodding in agreement, he accepted it when she drew it over her head and placed it in his hand. Dropping it around his neck, he saluted her, his smile flashing for the first time that dreary day. "Expect me when you see me, sweetheart. If I sleep not beside you tonight, then start on south tomorrow without me. I promise to catch up to you as soon as I can." Touching spurs to his horse, he galloped away.

The rain ceased altogether as Gillian's oxen pulled steadily on past the wagons mired in the road. A few

feeble rays struggled through the clouds as the sun timidly sought to shine.

Restlessly, she scanned the horizon for some sight of Leeds although she knew that hours of travel drawn by the plodding beasts remained ahead of her. Her stomach tensed nervously as she remembered the glimpse of the commander's face as he dispassionately ordered a man's death. Brian had not seen him. Pray God he could not find the squire.

The Leaping Salmon boasted an arch over the entrance to its courtyard. Through it Brian rode, his hand on his sword. In the midafternoon lull only a couple of ostlers spread straw over the muck created by the morning's rains. A brindle hound slept beside the door, the weak sun warming its rough coat.

One fellow moved to take the horse's bridle as the knight dismounted to enter the inn. "Hold him," Brian commanded. "I shall be riding on."

The youth tugged his forelock obediently.

Swinging down from the saddle, Brian strode through the open door of the inn into the dimness. The interior was a trifle musty but seemed clean enough. Briefly, he hesitated. A figure rose from behind a desk across the common room.

"Have you lodgings for the night with stabling for oxen?"

A tall, thin man eyed him calculatingly. "Aye. You be here early on to get whatever you choose."

Withdrawing coin from his purse, Brian paid the fee. With a conciliatory smile, he spun an extra coin on the desk. "Mayhap a troop of men rode this way some hours

earlier? Some half a score or so?"

The innkeeper stared at the coin, then shrugged contemptuously. "Many men ride this way."

Brian slipped another coin from his palm into his fingers, rubbing the two coins together. "The leader would be a lordly man, so I am told. A knight at the very least."

The innkeeper shrugged again, holding forth his palm. "Mayhap one of the hostlers did mention seeing Lord Ranulf of Briarthwaite ride by some short time ago. He usually travels in company."

"Lord Ranulf is he?"

The innkeeper sneered. "So he proclaims."

Brian glanced at the man keenly. "Where is this Briarthwaite?"

The innkeeper raised his eyebrows. Brian flipped another coin onto the desk. "Five miles out across West Riding."

Brian smiled grimly. "When my younger brother comes, tell him I have ridden in that direction. His name is Gil Fletcher from York Minster."

The innkeeper nodded curtly, slumping back onto the stool he had occupied until Brian had entered.

Briarthwaite boasted no castle. An old Norman round tower rose fifty feet above a confusion of small buildings. At the approach of Sir Brian de Trenanay a pack of hounds set up a howl.

Guiding his destrier through the welter of garbage that littered the yard that served as the bailey before the largest house in the grouping, Brian wrinkled his nose in disgust. Whatever his station, Ranulf must have fallen

on hard times. The neglect and decay of the hold was everywhere.

A frisson of disquiet prickled the hairs on the back of his neck. These English were notoriously clannish. Perhaps the squire was a cousin of this Ranulf. He did not trust any of them. Would Ranulf honor his knightly vows and help him to reclaim his lost armor?

Mounting the steps of the building, he knocked heavily. The rays of the setting sun threw a bright light against Brian's back, outlining him with its beams at the same time blinding anyone who opened the door.

Silence greeted his summons. Brian glanced around inquiringly. Again he knocked, bruising his knuckles against the oaken planking. The presence of the hounds indicated that their master was at home. Perhaps this was not the main house after all. He turned away from the door to stare doubtfully in the direction of the round tower.

Behind him the door swung open. Even as he turned back, without a sound, without a warning, a heavy whip snaked round his body, pinioning his arms to his sides with a band of fire. Reacting almost without thought he spun away off the steps stumbling to his knees on the rough ground.

"'Tis him, Lord Ranulf!" It was the squire's voice shrilling excitedly. "The churl who attacked you on the road."

"Yes." A new voice hissed in agreement. "I see." The whip sang again before it landed with a harsh snap across Brian's back and shoulder. The thick wool split as if it were gauze. Brian's entire body spasmed as the white-hot jet of fire seared along his back.

Violently, he lunged to his feet. "'Fore God . . ."



The whip wrapped around his ankle tripping him into the muck. He raised himself on his forearms as the whip snapped free again.

"Hear me!"

The man with the whip circled to one side. A snarling chuckle rasped from his throat as he cracked the whip down across Brian's shoulders. The end circled his throat choking off his speech. Rolling over, Brian sought to slide his fingers under the bloody leather, so he could breathe.

Dimly Brian became aware that a line of men had formed on the steps. Their faces were clearly revealed in the last rays of the setting sun. Avidly they watched as he struggled to draw breath into his laboring lungs.

"Seize him!"

At the command two men sprang forward from the steps. Roughly, they grasped his arms, dragging his fingers away from his throat and twisting him onto his knees. Gasping for breath, his senses began to fade.

With another snap the whip tore free leaving its bloody marking behind it. "Who are you?" the man with the whip barked. "Answer truthfully and find an easy death."

Dragging in a lungful of air, Brian raised his head. "A knight of St. Denis . . ." He cleared his throat twice with the effort to speak. His larynx felt half paralyzed by the blow it had sustained. The grip on his arms tightened as he raised his head.

"A Frenchman!" The voice spat the word.

"Aye, milord." This was the squire's voice again. "A Frenchman come over to follow the tournaments. He . . ."

"I am a true and honorable knight," Brian interrupted,

struggling to get one knee under him to raise himself out of the muck. "I was wounded in the tourney outside Harrogate. That churl . . ."

"He lies," the squire yelled. "He is no knight. A thief and cony-catcher he is."

"You lie!" Brian challenged surging upward despite the two men hanging onto him. "And you shall pay for that lie."

"Milord Ranulf," the squire's voice wheedled, "he is as I have said. Beware his lying tongue. A false Frenchman to be sure."

The sun's ray had faded turning the figures to silhouettes. Brian stared futilely at the lean, rather slight figure of the man with the whip, trying to see his features.

After a moment's silence, the man turned on his heel. "Bring him inside. Fetch a light."

Figures on the steps jumped to obey as the two men who held him hustled Brian forward. The way cleared for Lord Ranulf to enter the door. After him crowded the men of his troop, muttering to themselves. Finally, the two who held Brian between them, pushed him inside.

A torch blazed from out of the darkness, then another. One was thrust into the fire pit in the center of the floor. The other was bracketed on the hall above a long trestle.

Lord Ranulf of Briarthwaite seated himself at the end of the table underneath the torch and motioned his men to bring their prisoner forward.

"Let go," Brian commanded, shrugging fiercely, but their grips held firm. One transferred his hold from arm to wrist and twisted upward. Brian cursed as the pain smote him.

Thrusting his captive down on one knee, the man

twisted with all his might. Only the trained sinews of a seasoned knight held together under the strain. Forced to kneel, his face turned downward toward the filthy rushes, Brian felt sweat bedew his forehead and bathe his body.

Ranulf stared at the figure for a full minute, then motioned for a stoop of ale. As he waited, the others shuffled around the tableau taking seats at the benches and stools beside the trestle.

"What seek you here?" Ranulf asked at last.

Brian shook his head. "Let me rise and speak to you face to face as men should."

A mirthless chuckle was his answer. "Your accent betrays you, Frenchman. Speak from where you are if you ever hope to raise your head again."

Gritting his teeth to control his anger, Brian complied. "I was wounded at the tournament at Harrogate," he repeated. "That lying swine left me lying under a surgeon's knife and made off with my armor."

"He lies," the squire squealed.

"You lie!" Brian threw up his head in anger twisting his shoulders in an effort to throw off his captors.

"He be a strong one, Lord Ranulf," one of the men groaned. "Mayhap if we was to put a rope on him . . ."

The man at the head of the table nodded. His eyes ran appraisingly over Brian's figure. Despite his struggles a stout stick was thrust between his elbows and his back. Thick ropes were looped over his arms binding them to the bar and then passing around to his wrists and binding them in front of him. By the time the binding was finished, Brian was wild with frustration, barely able to resist tearing futilely at the ropes.

As the two stepped back, he flung up his head. "I am a

knight of St. Denis," he repeated haughtily. "I appeal to you as a comrade by your oath . . . by your spurs. . . ."

Ranulf raised his hand. "Spare me those ravings," he snarled. "How may I know this man stole your armor?" He nodded toward the squire who lounged grinning near the other end of the table.

"Do you have my armor?" Brian countered.

"I ask the questions."

"My armor—all my trappings—are marked with my motto. The medallion hangs about my neck even yet. The swine did not have a chance to steal it."

With a lazy gesture, Ranulf motioned one of the men forward. Fumbling at the neck of Brian's shirt, the fellow finally tore the lacings aside in disgust. Pulling the warm gold out into the firelight, the man jerked it loose triumphantly.

With a curse, Brian lunged after his medallion. The other man's foot shot out tripping him neatly. Unable to stop himself or use his hands to break his fall, Brian fell heavily. Dazed by his fall, he could not forestall the cry of agony that burst from his lips as the first man's booted foot thudded against his ribs.

"*Mucro Mors Cristo*," he heard the leader's voice reading laboriously. "It appears he was telling the truth, Hob. You did indeed rob him, you fool." He dangled the medallion in the squire's face. "And from the looks of this, you made a poor job of it."

## *Chapter Twelve*

Hob, the squire, squirmed uneasily in his seat. His eyes shifted from the glinting medallion to Brian's form twitching in the rushes before meeting Ranulf's mocking gaze. He smiled uncertainly. "Truth is . . . Truth is . . ."

Ranulf threw back his head, allowing his laugh to ring from the cobweb-festooned rafters. "I should be interested to hear your definition of truth when we have more time for you to think about it." He leaned forward, his face a mask of malicious mischief. "Tell me, Hob, would that large heavy bundle you brought with you and stowed in yon alcove contain this fellow's armor?"

The squire's eyes flickered toward the curtained area he had claimed for his own. His hand clenched nervously around the battered tankard. He shook his head. "Milord, I do just happen to have a few stray pieces of armor that my former master, the good Sir Giles of Roth-

ingham, left me when he died. But—God spare my soul—I never saw this fellow's things."

Brian raised his head painfully. "You lie," he rasped.

Ranulf sent a contemptuous glance in his direction. "Your accusations grow tedious, Frenchman." He nodded to one of the men. "Gag him."

The fellow knelt at Brian's shoulder. In a swift motion he ripped away a piece of cloth from the torn and bloody tunic. Wadding it into a ball, he crammed it roughly between Brian's jaws.

"A couple of you fetch this churl's bundle."

Despite the squire's whining objections, the bundle was brought, its straps cut, and its contents unwrapped on the floor. A full shirt of chain mail with chausses obviously made by the same craftsman had been wrapped around a cuirass, a pair of cuisses, a pair of poleyns, and a pair of greaves. Across the chest and back of the cuirass, the replica of the medallion's motto was worked in gold and blue enamel. A fine helmet, with flowing blue scarf attached, completed the outfit.

At the sight of his precious armor, Brian twisted mightily, levering himself into a half-sitting position. His eyes blazed in the dim light as they settled on the squire.

Ranulf's man pulled the mail shirt free and held it up for inspection. A jagged gash rent the leather over the left hip and stained the whole side with the dark brown stain of blood. Ranulf laughed. "Haul the Frenchman to his feet and tear off the remains of that tunic."

When it was done as he had commanded, Brian's upper body gleamed bare in the flickering torchlight. Ranulf motioned. The man at his shoulder pushed the captive forward. Ranulf's hand slid along the white skin at Brian's waist before pushing aside the woolen chausses to

reveal the fiery scar. Hard fingers touched the barely healed spot with surprising gentleness.

"Amazing coincidence, Hob," he remarked jocularly. "This fellow has a torn place here over the left hip in the same place as the mail shirt is torn. Would you like to change your story?"

An ugly flush darkened the squire's face. "Knights always getting torn up in tournaments," he argued. "That spot is a real common spot for a wound. Be the truth that Sir Giles died that way."

Ranulf clammed his tankard down on the table, spattering the ale. "Bind that lying oaf and throw him in the kennel," he commanded. Two of his men jumped to drag the whining, protesting squire away.

Slumping against his bonds in relief, Brian bowed his head before taking a deep breath. He had been believed. The gag was removed. Gratefully, he raised his eyes to the other knight.

"Now, what about your brother?" Ranulf's voice was carefully neutral.

For a moment Brian could not think whom he meant. Then knowledge dawned. "Oh, Gil." He grinned in relief. "He is not my brother. Merely a craftsman who helped me when I was wounded. He is nothing to me."

Something like a sneer curled Ranulf's thin-lipped mouth. His dark eyes glittered in the depths of the shadows cast by the torch leaping above and behind his head. "He protected you with a lie this morning," he pointed out softly.

Brian nodded uneasily. "Gil is a generous boy."

"Generous enough to follow you here to see what has happened to you?" The words were spoken lightly as Ranulf raised the tankard of ale to his lips.

Brian hesitated. He felt a prickle of apprehension. Although Gil's aid could be easily explained, he decided to absolve her altogether. "I left him when I saw that churl who stole my armor."

"You left him?"

"He was but common stock." Brian raised his head haughtily. "Release me, sir, and I will take up my armor and be on my way."

Again the dark eyes glittered from out of the shadows. "How do I know that the armor belongs to you?"

Brian drew a deep angry breath. He clenched his fists before he thought of how such defiance would look to the man seated at the long table coolly sipping ale. "You have my medallion."

Ranulf's fingers touched the gold and blue circle. "Ah, yes. I do have that." He lifted it as if to study it. "Of course, you might have stolen it. After all that wound in your side is a common enough wound for a knight on the tourney circuit."

Conscious that he was being played with, Brian raised his eyes from the table to stare straight ahead. Frustrated fury began to burn in his breast. The damnable English! Not a one of them was trustworthy. Thieving, lying blackguards all!

The man laid the medallion down on the surface of the scarred table. His hand closed around the handle of the black whip coiled on the floor beside his chair. Calmly he shook it out. "You and your brother are thieves," Ranulf asserted calmly. The whip snaked through the rushes, its forked lash gently slapping the ankle of Brian's boot.

Ranulf stood. "Take this 'thief' and chain him to the wall in my room," he commanded the men. Grinning, they grasped the wooden stake thrust between Brian's



arms and spine and guided their captive away.

Knowing resistance or argument useless, Brian went with them. As they hustled him through the door, he heard Ranulf order four men to ride into Leeds and find Gil. "Bring him back here. He too will entertain us tonight."

His arms stretched wide, his wrists chained with heavy cuffs that gnawed at them, Brian clamped his jaw against his frustration. Not only had he gotten himself into a dangerous situation, but Gil as well seemed likely to share his fate. If Ranulf stripped her to the waist as he had done Brian, her identity would be discovered.

A shudder ran through him. She could expect no mercy from such as these. His tender initiation of her body had in no way prepared her for the horror these men were capable of perpetrating. She would be worse than a virgin, for her proud defiance and lack of fear would only urge them to greater atrocities.

He rattled the chains, tugging futilely at the staples that attached them to the heavy oaken walls. He must get free! With a groan he listened as the sounds of horses' hooves pounding away in the darkness outside told him that the troop had left to find her.

The door to the chamber swung open and Ranulf entered, his black whip coiled loosely over his shoulder and under his armpit. For the first time Brian could see his adversary clearly by the light of several lamps and a fire leaping on the hearth.

The man was somewhat more than medium height; his body, although tall, could not by any stretch of the imagination be called huge. His hair was dark and lank, lying in thin locks upon his shoulders, rather than cut short as Gil's was to accommodate a helmet. His thin face was

clean-shaven, without even a mustache.

As Brian watched him narrowly, the man strolled to a table before the fire and poured himself a small drink from an earthenware jug. Tossing off the liquid with a gusty sigh, he turned back to Brian.

Face to face they stared at each other. The dark-haired man, the shorter of the two by several inches, smiled grimly as he read the anger and defiance in his captive's eyes.

Gently, his eyes burning with a strange light, Ranulf put up his hand to touch the red welt the whip had left around Brian's neck. In several places tiny droplets of blood had dried where the skin had broken under the impact. Curiously studying the face so close to his own, he traced the line around the strong column of the throat.

Delicately, the fingers trailed across the hard-muscled shoulder before sliding down into the curling sandy hair of the chest. Ranulf's smile never faltered as he watched the expression in the gold-flecked eyes change to one of horrified recognition.

"Come, Sir Brian," the man purred. "Surely you are not shocked. The 'celibacy' of the Templars and their kind is well known." With exquisite care his finger and thumbnail found and pinched the masculine nipple.

Flesh cringing, Brian tugged with all his might at the chains, flexing his muscles and straining.

Ranulf's smile deepened. "You cannot free yourself," he advised softly as he raised his other hand to stroke and prod Brian's lean middle, pushing the chausses down further to expose the white sheeny skin of Brian's taut belly. Where Ranulf's fingers strayed, the muscles jumped and quivered.

Furious, Brian spat a foul name into the dark smiling face.

For answer the nails sank deep into the flesh of Brian's nipple. Ranulf's smile became a sneer as the pain produced an involuntary gasp. "You should not say such things," the mocking voice advised. "I shall take offense and be forced to punish you before I can sample the delights of your powerful body."

Continuing to torture Brian's nipple, Ranulf began leisurely to untie the cord of his captive's chausses.

Brutally, intending to wound, Brian drove his knee upward aiming for the groin. His blow missed the vital spot, connecting with Ranulf's thigh and staggering the man sideways onto his knees.

The pose of cynical amusement slipped from Ranulf like a worn-out cloak. He rose spitting fury. "French pig!" he screamed. The whip rippled from his shoulder. Slinging it back to the length of his arm, he cracked it forward with all his force diagonally across Brian's chest.

The pain drove Brian's head back against the oak wall. It was as if a burning brand had been laid across his chest. And worse still was the humiliation he felt at his position. Chained to the wall in the bedroom of a catamite, his body writhing beneath the whip, he longed to scream his hatred to the very heavens. Instead he set his teeth to endure.

Opening his eyes, he glared his defiance. "English swine!"

Again Ranulf brought the whip slashing down across Brian's chest. And again! Blood began to drip from the cruel wounds. Enraged, stretched tightly between the iron staples, Brian's body twisted and spasmed as the leather tore across him and the cuffs flayed the skin on

his wrists.

After a half-dozen stripes laced across his victim's chest, Ranulf drew back. "Apologize," he panted.

For answer Brian spat the foul name again.

Suddenly smiling at Brian's continued defiance, Ranulf coiled the whip and slapped Brian playfully across the cheek. "Such strength," he purred. "How I shall enjoy making you weak." He stared fascinated as a slender trickle of blood found its way down over Brian's rib cage. As if mesmerized, he touched it with his fingertips.

The hounds set up a noisy clamor in the bailey. Frowning, Ranulf paused with his arm drawn back. The thudding of a bench being overturned further disturbed him. Uncoiling his whip, he turned away from Brian. A look of annoyance stiffened his features.

At a yell of pain from the hall beyond, he glanced back at his captive. "I fear I must leave you for the moment," he growled reluctantly. "This interruption had best be important or someone will take his place beside you." So saying, he opened the door.

In the center of the hall stood Gil Fletcher, an unassuming figure in scarlet and black. Giving the lie to her slender build and size was the six-foot longbow she grasped in her left hand. She stood with legs spread apart, presenting her left side, her left arm fully extended. The thumb of her right hand was firmly hooked under her right jawbone.

At the opening of the door, she turned her body smoothly, sighting down the shaft and training the broad-head on Ranulf's chest as he came through the door. "Where is Brian de Trenanay?" Her voice was high and boyish.

Ranulf smirked. The sight of the thin boyish figure excited his already stimulated senses. The knight would be much pleasure for an evening, but his kind could never be trusted. The slim youth would be malleable. What delightful excesses could be practiced on such tender flesh. Ranulf's dark eyes sought his cowering men.

Their numbers reduced, the few who remained had sought refuge behind the table when the bravest among them had fallen writhing with an arrow in his thigh.

"Swine!" Ranulf sneered. "You let a mere boy cow you with his toys."

"Where is Brian de Trenanay?" the "mere boy" inquired again. The bow neither wavered nor trembled in his hands. Instead, deliberately, the point dipped to aim at Ranulf's thigh. "This broadhead toy can do fearful damage to a man's leg, milord," he continued conversationally.

Ranulf nodded pleasantly. "Brian de Trenanay is within," he replied. "The problem for you, my foolish young friend, is how to get to him while still keeping your shaft trained on me. If I slip behind the door as I go back into the room, how will you keep me within sight to carry out your threat?"

Gil's point never wavered. Voice coldly determined, she raised the point again to Ranulf's heart. "You, sir, will not leave the room. One of your men will go at your command and bring Sir Brian here. I do not think you would encourage your men to disobey you when your life is at stake."

The thin face darkened. From Ranulf's lips erupted a stream of curses, some directed at his men, others directed at the youth who stood so calm across the room.

"My arm grows weary, sir," came the boyish voice. "Likewise the fingers of my right hand might slip their grip on the string at any minute. I suggest you select a trustworthy man and send him right quickly to fetch Sir Brian."

At an angry jerk of Ranulf's head, one man crept hesitantly from behind the stool overturned at the end of the table. Nervously, he approached his master, all the time keeping a wary eye on the bow, lest it swing in his direction. At arm's length he paused and cleared his throat before muttering unintelligibly.

"What do you say, sir?" Gil inquired sharply.

The man cleared this throat before ducking his head. "The key," he grated.

The point jerked slightly. "Get it from his pocket," Gil commanded; "but be careful you do not step between me and your master. The shaft would not pass quite through you but pin you two together as neatly as chickens on a spit."

The man's frightened face became paler. Carefully, he stayed to one side as he reached one trembling hand for the keys dangling from Ranulf's belt.

"Be gone no more than a minute," Gil advised him sternly. "Otherwise your master will find himself hopping around with an arrow through his foot."

As the man hurried into the adjoining room, Ranulf stared at the youth, memorizing the delicate features. "I will remember this," he snarled. "I will likewise remember both you and that rascally thief and liar."

"Sir Brian is no thief, nor is he . . ." Gil broke off, her voice faltering, as Brian de Trenanay appeared in the doorway. Swaying he grasped the doorframe for support before he straightened himself and pushed away.

"My thanks, young Gil," he croaked. "You seem to be making a practice of saving me."

Thankful that he could walk, Gil smiled briefly. "Practice makes perfect, Sir Brian. I strive to please in all things."

Brian nodded as he spied the pieces of his beloved armor, still strewn among the filthy rushes. He motioned to the remaining men crouched behind the table. "Into that torture chamber," he commanded.

Staring nervously at Ranulf's face, now icy with the chill of suppressed fury, the men obeyed, their fear of the bow greater than their fear of their master.

Brian knelt, stacking the pieces of his armor carelessly and rolling them into his mail shirt. Hastily, he tied the straps together. Satisfied that the bundle would remain intact, he rose wearily. "Now you," he gestured toward Ranulf.

The sight of both of his intended prey escaping drove the man into a frenzy. "Neither of you will be able to run far enough to escape me," he hissed. Saliva flecked the corners of his mouth. "You," he stabbed his index finger at Brian, "will suffer the tortures of the damned. 'Twill only comfort me when I see that filthy manhood sliced off in the dirt before me."

"Into the chamber!" Brian commanded, hearing Gil's shocked gasp behind him. "You are embarrassing my young friend."

"I will do more than embarrass him," Ranulf promised, never moving from where he stood. His anger had driven all caution to the winds. "Before I am finished with him, he will beg for mercy. Let me tell you, young catamite . . ."

"You will tell him nothing," Brian interrupted the

enraged ravings. "Into the kennel, dog, with your pack."

"You will not escape me," Ranulf promised as he retreated. "I have friends. . . ."

"In!" Brian shouted, his control breaking. Lunging forward, he served Ranulf a terrific blow to the jaw. It staggered the man back against the door facing from which he careened into the arms of one of his men. Slamming the door, he called to Gil. "Help me drag the table in front of it," he commanded. "'Twill not hold them long, but it might give us a few more seconds."

Even as he spoke the door opened a crack. Unhesitatingly, Gil loosed the arrow. Unerringly, the feathered shaft sped through the slit. The result was a surprised cry followed by the slamming of the door. For good measure Gil plucked another shaft from the quiver swung on her hip and sent it thudding into the oak planking.

From that moment all was silent behind the door. Brian caught up his heavy bundle of armor and lumbered for the door. "How did you get here?" he asked.

"I 'borrowed' a fellow's horse," Gil replied with a shake of her head. "He will be most upset if we do not arrive back at the Leaping Salmon before morn."

Brian nodded. "We must find my destrier and ride."

"Oh, the destrier awaits outside," Gil replied sunnily.

Brian stared at her open-mouthed.

"I found a poor fellow bound hand and foot in the kennel with the hounds. They were worrying him sorely. I set him free and in gratitude he agreed to hold the horses for the three of us. He too wants to escape from this horrible place."

"The squire!" Brian spat the word like a curse. "He is the cause of all this to begin with. Gil, you fool. He has probably stolen all the horses and left with them."



Bounding through the door and out onto the steps, he was brought up short by the sight of Hob, the squire, squatting on the ground.

With a smirk the man thrust himself forward onto his knees. "Oh, praise the Lord, that the young archer was able to free you, my lord." He threw up his hands toward heaven. "I was just about to ground-stake these beasts and burst in to the rescue."

Brian stared angrily at the man. "Liar!" he snarled. "You were quietly waiting to see the outcome. If we killed each other, you would probably rob the dead."

"Brian," Gil chided. "He is here. What more proof can the man give?"

"Aye." The squire scrambled to his feet and led Brian's horse forward. "Believe me, Sir Brian, I have guarded your armor with my life these past months. I could not find you after the tournament. I thought only to protect it. I knew its great value."

"Indeed you did." Brian snarled.

"They will be out that door while you argue," Gil insisted angrily. "Mount and ride." Suiting action to words, she swung into the saddle of the 'borrowed' horse. Laying heels to its sides, she wheeled it across the bailey.

"Later," Brian promised, likewise mounting, his armor requiring the squire's help to balance it.

"I follow, my lord," the squire called.

The three galloped out of Briarthwaite together.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

The arch over the courtyard of the Leaping Salmon was still a dark silhouette in the lighter night sky as Gillian with Brian and the squire Hob rode into the inn yard. The excitement of the night had waned to be replaced by bone-deep exhaustion for her. After driving all day under the most adverse circumstances, she had been greeted on arrival at the end by the news that Brian had ridden out early in the afternoon to find Ranulf of Briarthwaite.

The squire swung down to take the horses' heads, but neither Gil nor Brian seemed capable of dismounting. Balancing the unwieldy bundle of his armor, trembling with exhaustion, Brian could only cling weakly to the saddle. Like Gil he had done a full day's labor before bad luck and villainy had chained him to the wall of Ranulf's bedchamber. There he had sustained a fearful beating,

followed by a chilling ride half-naked through the wind-swept night.

"Milords?" Hob inquired curiously, staring up at their slumped figures.

"Can you move, Brian?" Gillian was the first to speak.

"In a minute," came the reply through set teeth.

"Hob, take this bundle and stand where I can see you."

"Now, milord . . ." the squire whined, reaching up to take the heavy armor and staggering back under its weight.

Throwing one long leg over the saddle horn, Brian slid down from the tired destrier on the same side as the squire. Meaningfully he gestured toward the porch of the Leaping Salmon. "Set it down there and be on your way."

"Brian!" Gil's weary voice chided him as she too dismounted. "He held the horses for us. We might have been recaptured by those men if he had not been there when we needed him."

"Damn it, Gil. This fellow was in a pickle back there too. You found him in the kennels remember. How much do you think would have been left of him had you not dragged him out? He had nothing to lose by holding the horses. He was leaving anyway."

"Then why did he not leave?"

With a muttered oath Brian stomped to the porch to scoop up his precious armor. "I shall take this to our rooms, then return to help you with the horses. Do not leave him alone with them, or they, too, might disappear."

As Brian disappeared into the inn, Gil sank down on the step, too exhausted to stand. Dismally she rested her head in one hand propped on a drawn-up knee. In the other hand she clutched the bow. She was so tired she

could not think.

"Milord." The squire was speaking to her. His voice seemed to come from far off. "If you will trust me, I will take the horses to the stable." His voice sounded sympathetic.

With a superhuman effort she roused from her stupor. "... Mus' go with you," she groaned, her voice slurred with tiredness, "... Return this horse to his stall."

"Yes, milord."

Staggering upright, she wove her way after Hob, who seemed to know the way unerringly. In the stable, she replaced the tired animal, ruefully hoping that the real owner would not be too disappointed with his mount's poor performance on the morrow. With a pat of gratitude and an extra scoop of oats, she turned away to find that her companion had finished attending to both the other mounts and stood waiting patiently to escort her back to the inn.

On the steps they met Brian, his spare tunic donned, his eyes searching the darkness angrily. His gruff bark of relief as they appeared was followed almost immediately by a disparaging comment. "So dishonest a man might have—"

He had said too much. Turning on him like a tiger, Gil stamped her foot. "Will you leave off?" she snarled. "We have both saved your life tonight! We have both placed ourselves in danger and made some implacable enemies for you! Do you thank us? No! Come on, Hob. There must be something in the kitchen of this inn. I am only hungrier than I am tired."

With a grin and a nod to Brian, Hob followed her through the door leaving the knight to fume and sputter in the darkness.

The kitchen of the Leaping Salmon was a dark and forbidding place until Hob, with a surprising familiarity, found the candles and flints. Lighting a couple with a flourish, he turned to Gil. "What would milord desire?" he inquired gracefully. "A little bread?" He opened a breadbox in one corner beneath the cabinets. "Some broken meats? I fear 'tis all that remains of this night's meal. Some cool ale?" His sharp eyes darted round the room to find a pantry door only waist high. Diving head-first, or so it appeared to Gil, he drew out several jugs, placing them on a suspended table.

Giggling at his antics, Gil sat at the table and allowed the older man to spread the food before her. "A sumptuous repast," she agreed, tearing the bread in half to share with him. "But how did you know where to find everything? I would have spent an hour and probably never found the meat and drink."

The squire raised an eyebrow. "Travel, milord," he informed her. "Inns are much the same—be they Leeds or Artois."

"For that I am glad," she nodded. She took a large bite of bread and meat followed by a long drink of ale. Sighing she leaned her elbows on the table.

Behind them Brian entered scowling still.

"Sir Brian . . ." Hob rose immediately. "Seat yourself, milord, and I will serve you."

But Brian motioned the man back to the bench. Availing himself of a battered tankard, he filled it with ale before straddling the stool at the end of the scarred kitchen table. Still without speaking he helped himself to the bread and meat. The three ate in silence, ravenous after the long day and night without food.

At last Brian cleared his throat. "How did you find me?"

Gil raised her head wearily from its support on her elbow. "When I got here, I asked where you had gone. The innkeeper told me you had inquired after Sir Ranulf of Briarthwaite. A few judicious questions in the common room were all I needed to know the local tales. The man is hated and feared by everyone in the vicinity of his hold."

"I can well understand why," Brian nodded. Furtively he touched his chest hidden by the tunic he had donned before joining them. He would be bruised and scarred for many a long day. He shuddered despite his desire to remain impassive before them.

"They say he is a thief who usurped the former lord's desmesne when he and all his family died of the plague," Gil continued.

"But as a knight, he would have been awarded those lands by the king," Brian objected.

The squire snorted. "He is no knight, nor ever was one," he maintained, draining the ale from his tankard. "He knows nothing of knightly behavior except some aping of manners he has picked up here and there."

Now it was Brian's turn to snort. "And I suppose you know more?"

The squire stared at the candle flame. In its dancing light, the wrinkles on his face were deeply etched along with lines of fatigue. "Once I did." His mouth twitched. He smiled without humor. "Once I did," he repeated. "Now I know enough to pick out a *poseur* the length of a tourney list."

"You joined him," Brian reminded the squire snidely.

"Aye, milord," the man replied shortly. "I did that."

"You took my armor," Brian insisted.

Hob continued to stare into the candle flame. His curly blond hair was streaked with gray. "I saw a chance. I took it. But it did not come to pass." He shrugged. Pushing back from the table, he rose. With a short stiff bow he addressed them both. "You have recovered your armor and your chance. I shall leave you, gentles, to your better fortune."

"Oh, Hob," Gil sighed. "Sit you down. Sir Brian does not think straight at this time of night. Otherwise, he would not keep repeating the same meaningless phrases over and over." She stared wearily in Brian's direction. "Do let us go to bed . . . before I fall over on my face."

"I only took one room for the two of us," Brian reminded her coldly.

"Only one bed?" she inquired meaningfully.

"Of course."

"Perhaps we should draw lots for the spaces then," she smiled sweetly at Hob, who stood uncertainly as they argued.

"Oh, no." He shook his head. "A bed in the stable's good enough for me. After that filthy hold at Briarthwaite, 'twill seem clean and sweet."

"Brian!" Gil's voice was urgent.

Reluctantly the knight rose to his feet. "We can probably get a pallet from the common room. Wait at the foot of the stairs, Gil, while Hob and I go see what we can find."

When the two returned, carrying a pallet and a couple of blankets, they found her huddled in the corner on the first step. She had fallen asleep, her head on her out-

stretched arm where it rested on the third.

"A very brave lad," Hob observed, real admiration tinging his voice.

"Indeed," Brian replied softly. "Very brave. The very bravest of lads. Would that I could make him my squire?"

"Why do you not?"

Brian snorted softly as he stooped and eased her into his arms. "He has not the interest. I have asked him. He is a guildsman."

"Bowyer?"

"Fletcher." They mounted the stairs, and Brian led the way to their small room.

The squire nodded. "I guessed one or the other when I saw the way he used that bow."

Lowering his burden to the bed, Brian straightened out her limbs, before seating himself to pull off his boots. "Little bits of sticks and feathers," he groaned tiredly.

Hob spread out the pallet on the floor in front of the door. "Very powerful," he observed.

The knight pulled up his tunic and gingerly prodded the whiplashes across his chest. Deciding they were superficial and required no attention before morning, he stretched out full length. Only the moonlight and a faint glow from the hearth gave the room any light at all. As he drew the blanket over them both, he could not forbear an admiring chuckle.

"He did hold them off. They were cowering like scared sheep behind that table. Had it all planned. Ranulf never had a chance."

"Ranulf will come for revenge," the squire muttered, turning over to his side in an effort to get comfortable on



the hard boards.

"We must plan how to get away as early as possible in the morning," came the sleepy reply.

A heavy weight pressed against Gil's back. Hot breath blew rhythmically in her ear. Her eyes flew open, alarmed, forgetful of where she was and with whom. The first streaks of dawn lightened the lead panes of the tiny window. The sun!

Abruptly, all the weary toil and fearsome danger of the previous day returned. She clutched Brian's wrist where it lay beneath her breasts. How serious were his hurts? Had Ranulf injured him in any way?

Turning onto her back, she stared at his face turned toward the increasing brightness. His beard was rough and stubbly. The lines around his mouth were deeply etched, as were a pair bisecting his forehead between his eyebrows. One sharp cheekbone was marred by a nasty-looking abrasion.

The overall picture was one of a face honed almost to the bone by deprivation. Even in sleep, Brian de Trenanay denied himself the luxury of total relaxation.

As her eyes moved over him, his nose twitched slightly. He mumbled something unintelligible; his hand tightened convulsively, then relaxed. She felt the strength of his fingers on her ribs. She had felt that strength before. It lay always latent yet perfectly controlled. When he had made love to her, she had been subliminally aware of its existence. When he had thrown his shoulder against the wheel of the wagon to lift them out of the muck, she had witnessed what he was capable of.

Shivering slightly, she lowered her gaze to his chest partially bared by the unlaced thong at the opening of his tunic. A cross of bruised, swollen flesh almost directly below his throat drew a faint gasp of pity from her. The ends of the cruel marks disappeared on either side beneath the tunic. How long they were or what kind of damage they had wreaked on his shoulders and rib cage, she could only guess. Involuntarily, she touched them with her fingers.

His eyes opened slowly, unfocused at first. He blinked. The lines in his face deepened in a grimace. Still half asleep he moaned, closing his eyes again as the condition of his body hit him forcibly.

He drew a deep breath, swelling his chest, and rolled gingerly over onto his back. The breath escaped him in a heartfelt groan. "God! Why did I have to wake up?"

Instantly contrite, she levered herself up on one elbow. "Forgive me," she begged. "I did not mean to touch you and waken you."

He smiled weakly. "No apology from you," he admonished her, shaking his head. "We must be gone if we are to escape that pack of dogs. I simply wanted to die rather than face warming up these muscles. I feel as though I have been beaten."

Her smile was sad. "You have," she reminded him.

He chuckled ruefully. "Oh, that. Nothing, Gil. Really nothing. Hardly scratches. That limp-wristed pig was playing with me. Probably does worse than that to his lover." But he carefully put his hand inside of his shirt to trace the lines. "Hardly broke the skin."

Abruptly, she sat up, ruffling her short hair. Despite her lack of sleep the night before, she felt reasonably able to face the day's journey. Brian's reminder of the "limp-

wristed pig" had galvanized her into action. The memory of Ranulf's face as she sighted along the shaft sent a chill of apprehension over her body. The oxen were slow. To abandon the cargo and flee was unthinkable. She closed her eyes uttering a silent prayer.

"Shall I fetch a pitcher of hot water?"

Both heads turned startled toward the door. Forgetting as they threw off the numbing effects of sleep, both stared in surprise at Hob, who rose stiffly to his knees with an ingratiating grin.

"No."

"Yes, Hob!" Gil's voice rose above Brian's. "You need those 'scratches' washed," she insisted. "Look at your wrists, Brian."

He raised his arm above his face. His fist clenched at the sight of the lacerations flecked with dried blood where the cuffs had torn him as he struggled to break free. His jaw tightened as he dropped his arm across his eyes.

Dragging the pallet aside, Hob left while Gil rose and opened one of her packs. "I have a jar of salve," she murmured rummaging through her belongings. "Uncle Tobin insisted that I put it in. Ah . . ." She turned back triumphant to find Brian sitting up on the edge of the bed.

His forearms rested dejectedly on his thighs. His head hung down. His breaths were slow and shallow, as he tested his strength. "We must be away, my lady," he said softly, never bothering to raise his head. "You would not be safe from that swine."

Dropping to her knees beside him, she stared up into his face. "You would be less safe than I, milord. Those cuts and bruises need attention. Lockjaw is no pleasant

way to die, and many do die of it."

He sighed as he stared into her innocent face. "I did wrong," he admitted touching her cheek lightly. "I should have made thorough inquiries before I went riding out to that midden demanding my armor and depending on English honor. Anyone who would let that fellow," he jerked his head in the direction Hob had taken, "attach himself to an entourage is suspect."

Gillian rose disgusted. To talk to Brian about Hob was like talking to a brick wall. The squire had done him a bad turn. He would never have another chance. She could not argue with Brian's experience. Perhaps he was right.

Turning her back, she drew a fresh smock from her pack and slipped it over her head like a tent. Aware of Brian's stare, she fumbled under the enveloping folds, sliding her arms out of the soiled one, untying the lacings, and allowing it to drop down around her waist. She was stuffing the folds of the fresh one underneath when Brian burst out laughing.

"Sweet Jesus, Gil. What a performance to keep me from seeing your chest! Do you think that I would become so inflamed by the sight of your body that I would throw you down and ravish you before Hob comes back with the water? . . ." A knock interrupted him. "Ah, here he is now."

At Brian's chuckling call, Hob entered bearing a large steaming pitcher and several towels draped over his forearm. He glanced inquiringly at the knight whose laugh he had never heard. Setting his burdens down on the stand beside the basin, he turned to catch sight of Gil, red-faced, struggling to tuck her fresh smock through the neck opening of her soiled one.

At the expression on the squire's face, Brian burst into

another gale of laughter which collapsed him weakly onto his side on the bed.

The squire's face was a study as he sought to suppress a grin at what he believed to be painful shyness on the part of the young boy. His lips twitched and he dropped his eyes to the washstand, carefully arranging the towels and pressing imaginary creases out of them.

Scowling angrily, too embarrassed to speak, Gillian swung on Brian, having fumbled her smock over her head at last. Smoothing the fresh one into place, she flung the soiled garment at her pack and stalked to the bed. At the sight of her angry mouth creased into a tight line, Brian raised his hand and pointed weakly, going off into a fresh fit of laughter.

With a stamp of her foot, she grabbed the hem of his garment and hauled him urgently into a sitting position. As the rough wool rasped against his flesh when she pulled it over his head, his laughter ceased. His protest was muffled in the folds of his tunic.

Nevertheless, he emerged grinning, his face more relaxed than it had been in many a long day as he tried to catch her eye.

Refusing to meet his gaze, she studied the stripes, less horrified than she might have been at his condition. If he could laugh like that at her natural modesty, he must not be hurting very badly. "Hob," she called.

The squire poured water into the basin and brought it with a fresh towel to her side. At the sight of the knight's chest, his lips thinned.

Brian glanced at him a little surprised to find any emotion, much less sympathy registered there. He followed his companion's stares to his chest. The sight wiped away

the smile. He swallowed, hesitated, then wiped a hand across the lower half of his face. "Looks as if I caught the wrong end this time," he remarked softly.

Gillian dipped the end of the towel into the warm water and began to wash him, beginning with the topmost weal. It lanced down halfway between his neck and the point of his shoulder. Across the collarbone, the skin had broken and lay open. Blood scabbed over the wound and trickled down into the hair on Brian's chest. Despite her gentle touch with the warm water and towel, the knight winced.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"'Tis no matter," he gritted. "Get on with it and swiftly. We must be away." He drew in a deep breath and looked at Hob. "Set that basin on the floor," he commanded, "and go make arrangements for our wagon to be hitched and the horses saddled. I assume you are planning to take the horse you stole from Ranulf."

The squire shrugged. "He never paid me."

Brian's lip curled as he nodded, his green eyes glittering meaningfully at Gil. "Begone! And bespeak a hearty breakfast while you are about it. We will follow directly."

The door closed behind him. The silence grew heavy in the air as Gillian continued to dab gently at wounds. She cleaned them as best she could, then doused his wrists in fresh water and smeared the sweet-smelling salve over-all. At last she sat back with a sigh. "Shall I bandage your wrists?"

He shook his head. "They are no worse off than the rest. The air will heal them. Bandages might make them stiff."

She stared up at him. "I notice you did not bid Hob be on his way."

He shrugged as he gingerly rotated his hands, testing

the movability of the joints. "The man has burned his bridges with Ranulf. We probably could not depend on him for much, but little is better than nothing."

"You expect trouble."

"Oh, they might skulk on our trail for a few days before they give up and fall upon some other poor souls. 'Tis all they are capable of." He rose and stretched expansively. From his great height he smiled down at her in a manner that was meant to be reassuring. "That pack of dogs has not the courage to attack head-on. Even a boy with a bundle of sticks and feathers could hold them at bay." He drew his tunic over his head, so he did not hear her outraged gasp.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

As if in recompense for the terrible weather of the day before, the sun shone at its very brightest. A cool breeze from the west blew away the steam as it rose from the drying earth. The landscape shimmered a vibrant green as the wagon accompanied now by two riders followed the old road southward toward London.

"We should easily make Sheffield before nightfall," Brian remarked conversationally, as he walked the destrier beside the lumbering wagon. "We are making good time."

Gil smiled wanly. Her arms ached from holding the reins and from cracking the whip across the backs of the plodding beasts. Her bottom ached from contact with the flat board of the wagon seat. Worst of all, her head was beginning to ache from exhaustion. Her all-but-sleepless night was taking its toll of her strength. Wearily, she



glanced at the sun high in the sky only slightly over her left shoulder.

Misinterpreting her look, Brian looked over his shoulder toward the squire, who rode behind and to the right. "No sign of Ranulf?" he inquired.

"No, milord." Hob straightened stiffly in the saddle as though startled by the voice. He grinned sheepishly at the backs of the two ahead of him. He had in fact been dozing.

"I knew he would not have the courage to follow," Brian went on cheerfully. "He and his drunken crew are probably just now waking up. After we escaped them, they probably bandaged up that fellow's thigh and drank themselves into a stupor while they traded empty threats and promises."

"You seem to be right, milord," the squire replied dutifully.

"How far is Sheffield?" Gil asked tiredly.

"Oh, probably half a day." Brian smiled at her. "Getting tired? Shall I drive?"

"Are you sure 'tis safe?"

"As a church procession."

For answer Gil scooted over on the seat and extended the reins in his direction. The squire urged his horse around the back of the wagon and took the destrier's reins as Brian left the saddle. The exchange was made without a pause.

Within minutes, Gil found herself nodding. She did not protest when Brian guided her down onto the wagon seat and cradled her head on his thigh. "Not the most comfortable cushion, Lady Gillian," he whispered, "but certainly the best around."

Without replying she closed her eyes thankfully and

gave herself up to sleep.

And so the pattern for the next week was set. They managed to make between twenty and twenty-five miles a day by driving from sunup to sundown. Twice more it rained, but the rest of the trip was conducted in relative comfort. Of Ranulf and his men there was no sign.

After a few days Gillian forgot all about them and managed to enjoy a few of the sights of the strange towns they journeyed through. Nottingham, Leicester, Northampton, Bedford, and Luton appeared daily. She craned her neck as they drove through but dared not stop. Perhaps on her way back, she promised herself hopefully. The most important thing was the commission. It must arrive safely.

Furthermore, Brian seemed daily more and more impatient. The snail's pace maddened him. He longed to be away and into his beloved France. Neither the scenery nor the architecture pleased him. Although he had come to accept Hob and no longer sniped at him, he treated him with only grudging acceptance.

At night his temper hovered near the boiling point. Conscious of him lying stiffly in bed beside her, Gillian tried vainly to keep their bodies from touching as they slept together in the narrow beds in the inns. The pattern of the first night was repeated. Hob slept on a pallet before the door, steadfastly refusing Brian's offer to pay for an extra room.

Had not his pride prevented him from sleeping on the floor while a servant occupied the bed, Brian would gladly have changed places with Hob. In the bed, lay Gillian, her nubile body pressed innocently against his. While she lay awake, she held herself carefully away from him, properly taking up no more than her share of

the bed. During this time he could manage to remain cool. Repeatedly, he told himself that he cared nothing for her scrawny body. After all she was hardly more than a boy. No shape to her at all.

But in a little while her even breathing would tell him she had fallen asleep. Her body would relax. One arm would move, seeking a more comfortable position. Her leg would be drawn up to press against the outside of his thigh. Sooner or later she would turn toward him, pressing herself against him, like a child craving warmth. Then he would set his teeth with a groan. The memory of her taut breasts, their nipples hardened by his careful touches, would rise up before him.

Why had he not wooed her with more care? Why had he stupidly lost control without bringing her to pleasure too? And why, oh why, had he turned from her to sleep, leaving her unsatisfied? He had only himself to blame. His hell was of his own making.

Roundly, he cursed the squire for joining them in the room. Yet he saw no way around the problem without revealing Gillian's secret and leaving her at the mercy of the man when they should part at the end of the trip. He could not be expected to escort her back to York. He had no intention of taking the Saxon squire to France with him when he returned. He would quickly rid himself of the fellow, even should he care to remain. He would get a French squire, one he could trust.

So he sweated, setting his teeth and clenching his fists as her sweet breath fanned his cheek and his body stiffened until he thought he would burst.

Not until they stayed for the night at St. Alban's Abbey in the magnificent gatehouse did Hob have a room to himself. Instead of large common rooms or rooms with

sleeping places for two or three, the abbey provided them with small separate rooms each opening onto a narrow hall which led to the dining chamber and thence to the kitchen.

"How can an abbey have such beautiful rooms?" Gillian asked innocently as she stared around her at the small chamber with its canopied bed raised on a platform so high that three steps were required to climb into it.

His lips twisted in a cynical smile. "This abbey probably has as much or more land than the largest estate in Hertfordshire. All that money coming in plus no taxes. The money has to go somewhere. The monks get their food and lodgings. So why not live well?"

"But . . ." She hesitated. "I thought they were just poor men who begged for food."

Brian snorted. "'Tis easy to see you have never been anywhere," he observed loftily. "Monks and friars and priests—they are just men, Gil. They chose a profession that looked good to them. Some did not even get a choice. If you are dissatisfied, but you cannot quit, what do you do?"

Staring around her with eyes wide and eyebrows raised, Gillian observed the rich carpet on the floor, the dark well-polished wood of the handsome bed and chest, the leaded-glass panes through which the afternoon sun streamed. The apartment was luxurious to her unsophisticated eyes. She shook her head. "But their vows . . ."

Brian shrugged. "The English are a long way from Mother Church in Rome," he sneered. "Merely another example of their bad faith and untrustworthiness."

Gillian shot him a look of pure annoyance as he turned on his heel and strode out. He was the most irritating man she had ever known. Even among craftsmen, a breed par-

ticularly noted for its stiff-necked pride, she had not observed anything to equal Brian's support of everything French and his denigration of everything English.

Sinking down into the soft eiderdown *guedon*, Gillian stared at the folds of the tall, gracefully draped canopy above her. At times Brian was the most wonderful of men, brave, resourceful, gentle, considerate. At others he made her grit her teeth. The obstinacy, the pure blind stubbornness, of the man was hard to bear.

While he had bent every effort to repay her for her nursing, he had never really thanked Hob or her for pulling him out of Briarthwaite. To her way of thinking, such pride was ridiculous. He had been in trouble. She had saved him. He would have done the same thing for her. She would have thanked him profusely. Where was the difference? Surely he was above that silly business of women being weak and helpless. Surely he recognized that she did a man's work. She shrugged. If he did not, more fool he.

Rolling over on her stomach and drawing up one leg, she snuggled down in the soft billowing comfort. A short nap before supper. She closed her eyes with a contented sigh.

A fly tickled her nose!

Annoyed, she brushed at it.

It settled on her ear. Its tiny feet swept round the shape and down behind her lobe. Her eyes slitted open. The room in which she lay was dark. She closed her eyes. Again the tiny creature traced its way across her cheek and into the shell of her ear.

Groaning angrily, she brushed at her face. Her hand

encountered an arm.

Brian!

Rolling over on her back, she gazed up at his face, a dim white shape in the dark. "What is't o'clock?"

"You have missed your evening meal," he informed her cordially.

"Oh, no," she moaned. Her hand clapped to her stomach. "I only meant to sleep a few minutes. Why did someone not come for me?"

She felt his weight leave the bed. A scratch of flint and a candle flame flickered. "I thought you needed your sleep more."

She sat up, childishly rubbing her eyes with her fists. "And not my supper. Oh, thank you."

He turned back, a tray in his hands, his face split in a grin. "As you order, milady."

A delectable odor wafted to her from the dishes. She closed her eyes and sniffed appreciatively. "Do I smell venison?"

"Cooked in ale," was his laughing reply. "The brothers assured me it markedly improves the flavor. Although how they could tell with all the leeks they have it stuffed with is beyond me." With a flourish he set the tray down on the chest at the foot of the bed.

Eagerly, she rolled across the bed to lean over the foot and inspect the meal. Her brown eyes glowed in the candlelight. "Oh, Brian. Thank you so much for saving it for me."

He grinned as he balanced his long body on the corner of the chest. "My pleasure." He hefted the jug from the tray. "Real wine," he announced, pulling his knife from his belt and setting to work on the cork. "Not French, of course, but a reasonable vintage from Germany. Hob and

I split a bottle at supper."

She stared at it. "Am I supposed to drink it all?" she inquired incredulously.

"As much as you want," he replied, extracting the cork and pouring some of the pale golden liquid into an earthenware goblet. "What you do not drink, I will finish off." She regarded him doubtfully as he handed it to her. "Try it. See if it meets with your approval."

"I have no basis to judge." She shook her head, before touching her lips to the rim of the goblet. Tentatively, she took a sip. The liquid was cool and tart. It reminded her a little of a grape she had tasted once at a feast in the guildhall, but different. Taking a larger sip, she rolled it around on her tongue. Finally, she swallowed with a slight grimace.

Brian watched her narrowly. "What do you think?"

Privately, Gillian thought it was nothing special, but she did not like to hurt his feelings. His expression was eager. "Oh, I think it tastes fine." She smiled generously at him.

His grin broadened as if at some private joke. "Have some food," he invited her.

Instead of the usual trencher of planchet bread with a slice of meat, the venison was served on a pewter plate with turnips liberally sprinkled with pepper on the side. A small round loaf of bread and a smear of butter completed the repast.

Drawing herself up to sit cross-legged and reach over the end of the bed, she speared a piece of turnip and popped it into her mouth. The pepper made it so hot that tears sprang to her eyes and she expelled her breath in a loud huff. Fingers wiping at her cheeks, she reached for the wine goblet again.

"The cook is over generous with his spices," she remarked hoarsely, when she could speak.

"'Tis a mark of wealth," Brian shrugged. "The rich eat all their foods heavily spiced with pepper. Therefore, the cook considers it a necessity of his meal. I remember once staying at a monastery near Coventry. . . ." He was off on a story that kept her entertained throughout the whole meal.

As she drank and ate, the wine warmed her body and relaxed her tired muscles. She felt wonderful, light-headed and happy. Brian's story turned out to be uproarious. If she had tried to recall it later, she could not have done so, but midway into it, she began to giggle.

At her first mirthful response, he raised his eyebrows. Smoothly, he refilled her goblet. At the finish of his tale while she fell backward on the bed helpless with laughter, he removed her plate.

"Why not be comfortable?" he suggested blandly, producing another jug of wine as if by magic and skillfully dragging out the cork. "Take off that tight binder around your chest. You must have been miserable this past week with Hob near every moment of the time."

She eyed him suspiciously for an instant before righting herself primly. "I have not been too uncoffo—uncomfortable," she stammered, her tongue strangely thick.

Before she realized he had moved, he was sitting behind her on the other side of the bed. His arms went around her, drawing her back against him. His hands sought the buckle at her waist. "You are a brave, uncomplaining girl," he agreed as he undid her belt and let it fall away.

"Wha—what are you doing?" she gasped hazily.



"Making you more comfortable." His lips brushed her ear as his hands slid beneath the hem of her smock to enclose her waist. "We knights know how important it is to let the skin breathe. I have worried about you for several days now."

"You have?" Her voice was husky as she took a deep breath.

His fingers firmly massaged the skin of her waist, slipping warmly over her ribs and even down beneath her chausses to her belly and hips. "Oh, I have," he whispered. "I have thought about you often."

Slightly dizzy, she leaned her head back against his shoulder while his hands continued to work their magic. "I thought you did not care. You never even said 'thank you' for rescuing you." This last was uttered in a childish treble.

The fingers paused, then started onward. "I did not, did I? How remiss of me, *chérie. Merci. Merci bien.*" His lips found her cheek and trailed their fire across it to her earlobe. There his lips drew back and he nipped it sharply.

"Oo-o-o-oh!"

Instantly, he kissed her cheek again and blew his hot breath into her ear until she shivered.

"You hurt me."

"Nonsense," he whispered as his palms cupped her breasts, freed as if by magic from their binding. His thumbs circled her nipples, pressing deeply into the center of each firm mound.

Involuntarily she squirmed and arched her body away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Hush. Do not speak," he commanded, pressing hard into her breasts to bring her back against him. "Drink

another sip of your wine."

"But . . ." She subsided against him.

Instantly, the pressure was released and the gentle circling continued. "Your breasts must be feeling much abused," he continued softly, shifting his body and beginning to kiss her other cheek. His thumbs and forefingers began to shape her nipples.

Unable to help herself, she moaned into the goblet.

"I have often thought how I would like to stop by the side of the road and lead you off into a field covered with yellow flowers. There I would stretch you out among the flowers and free your poor abused breasts to the fresh air and sunlight." Drawing back slightly, he tugged the smock over her head. With one hand he cast it aside while with the other, he took the goblet from her and set it over at the end of the bed.

Embarrassed, she covered her breasts with her hands.

"Oh, no, *chérie*." He caught her wrists and drew them away to her sides. "You must allow your skin to breathe. Allow the air to touch you. Breathe deeply yourself." Hypnotically, his voice commanded her, while his hands roamed at will over her shoulders, her back, her breasts.

Her body slumped weakly against him as he guided it back to rest on his chest. Hands lying limply where he willed them, she gave herself up completely to his ministrations. Soon her nipples stood like pale rose pearls, hard and lustrous beneath his hands.

"Do you like the way your sweet breasts feel?" he asked her, squeezing each one in turn, before rolling each firm tip and pinching it lightly.

A moan was his answer.

"Do you like for me to do this to you? Does it relax you? Make you feel good?"

A soft unintelligible murmur rasped from her throat in response to a particularly hard pinch.

"You once said that this hardly seemed worth the trouble," he reminded her smoothly. "You said it was too much trouble. Remember, *chérie*. Remember!" He punctuated his reminder with another pinch.

Dimly, she thought herself odd to respond to something ordinarily so painful with mounting excitement and pleasure. Not wanting to answer him, she turned her face into his neck, but he refused to accept her silence.

"Come, Gillian. You must answer," he whispered. One hand held her breast tormenting the nipple until she thought she must cry out, for pressure had begun to build within her belly.

As if he were a wizard or a mind reader, his other hand slid beneath the tie of her chausses and splayed across her sensitive skin, pressing downward to meet the building excitement. Two of his long fingers found their way into the soft curling hair at the top of her thighs.

A low passionate cry escaped her.

"Answer me," he commanded. "Tell me this is too much trouble."

"No!" she sobbed. "No. Oh, please, Brian."

"Please, what, *chérie*." As the heel of his hand circled gently and rhythmically beneath her garment, his fingers slid deeper into her nest to find the very core of her pleasure. Even as his index finger touched it, she cried out, pressing her teeth into his neck, unknowingly biting him in her anguish.

A fervent oath burst from his lips. "*Dieu, chérie!*"

"Oh, Brian. Please. Please. Something . . ."

"I must leave you for just a moment, Gillian," he whis-

pered, his voice a ragged rasp.

She could not control her passionate stirrings as he stretched her body on the bed and pulled off her chausses. Her brown eyes followed him pleadingly as his hands caressed her inner thighs for an instant before he straightened up and stepped down from the platform. In a matter of moments he had divested himself and returned to her side. Naked, his body gleaming in the candlelight, his jade green eyes glittering, he straddled her, pressing her thighs together between his knees.

"Too much trouble?" he murmured in jest, his index finger sliding in to the joining of her thighs.

She cried out. Her voice a sweet sob of torment.

"I do not think you will ever say that again." His smile was the smile of a conqueror.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Like the breaking of a gigantic wave, intense feeling swept upward through her belly. With unbelievable gentleness, his finger insinuated itself deeper, slipped back and forth in the soft warmth. Another finger and then another joined the first, urging her to move her limbs and arch her lower body upward for his touch.

The golden flecks in his eyes gleamed in the candlelight. Gillian stared upward drinking in his masculine beauty, stirred as she had never thought possible by his love-making. Something must come of this. She could not endure such pressure as seemed to be building inside of her. She had never fainted before, had no clear idea of what a faint might be. Perhaps she would faint. She closed her eyes, her senses reeling as he continued his touches.

"Brian," she protested, arching herself against him.

He transferred some of his weight to the upper part of his body bringing down an elbow alongside her head. "Yes, *chérie*." His voice was a deep-throated purr. His knee parted her slender thighs.

Remembering the night at the Black Ox, she welcomed him as he positioned himself at her moist entrance. Catching her lip between her teeth in a gasp, she tried to push herself onto the hard muscle whose tip tantalized her so. The aching void within her craved him. Never had she felt filled with such intense longing. If she did not have him, she would die.

And if she did, she felt she would die too somehow.

A soft sob punctuated his entrance into her body. At its sound he paused. "Gillian? Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, her eyes firmly closed, a look of intense concentration stiffening her features.

Satisfied that she was well, Brian began to move his body upon hers. His hands curved under her buttocks, lifting her so that he could drive into her more deeply.

Her lips parted; her head dropped back, arching her throat to his eager lips. He kissed it tenderly as he thrust his throbbing muscle into her to his full length. The curious mixture of tenderness and hardness wrung a whimper from her as she bit down hard on her lower lip.

He heard it dimly. His own need was burgeoning; sweat bedewed his massive shoulders and chest. Yet somehow he raised himself to search her face earnestly for signs of her distress. "*Chérie* . . ."

"Please, Brian," she whispered. "Oh, please, do not stop. I . . ." Unable to find words for the ecstasy she felt approaching, she pushed upward with her hips. At the same time her arms encircled his head drawing him down to wreak his tender havoc on her breasts. "Please," she

begged through clenched teeth. "Please, kiss me . . . here again."

Smiling at the ingenuousness of her plea, he made no protest as she pulled his head down until his mouth closed over one rose-tipped point now almost thorn hard with her arousal. Gently he traced his tongue round and round before drawing the nipple up between his teeth to bite it sharply. At the same moment he stroked hard into her, grinding their loins together.

She cried out as every muscle in her body tensed in response. Then her passion burst, in an explosion of white-hot light and sensation that rushed upward from the joining at her thighs to pour into her belly, her heart, her mind.

As her muscles contracted around him, the exquisite pressure wrung from him the same climactic response. He gasped, dragging in his breath in a pained rasp before slowly releasing it. Mindful of his weight and her comfort as he had never been with any woman before, he rolled to one side, pulling her with him, keeping her locked against his chest.

She felt his hands lifting her and arranging her but could do nothing to help herself or aid him. Even as she clutched weakly at his shoulders, the waves of passion returned, less violent, but nevertheless real. The fresh agitation of their loins as he moved her had set off fresh responses. Drowning in a wash of pleasure, she shuddered helplessly. Her teeth grazed his collarbone as her returning ecstasy drove her mindless.

When the sheath of muscle that encased him began to contract again, Brian groaned. Despite his not inconsiderable experience as a lover, the overwhelming response of this slender girl was new to him. He had pleased his

share of ladies some of whom had claimed to be dying for him. They had never done much more than pant and groan before collapsing limply under him. The sensations this girl had invoked were so intense as to be almost a totally new experience for him.

As he stroked her fair bobbed hair back from her hot little face, he considered the reason for such a thing. Could it be that her muscles were so much stronger because of the boyish activity she constantly demanded of them? He dropped a sleepy kiss on her forehead as he gathered her more closely against him, taking care to leave them joined together.

Gillian awoke in total darkness. The heavy breathing of her bedmate alarmed her not at all. Indeed, she had grown so used to Brian's presence in her bed that she hated to think of the time when they must part. He was so strong, so warm, so solid beside her.

Stirring slightly, she blushed as she became aware of the tangle of their limbs. Drawing a deep breath, she sought to lift her leg off Brian's hip. At her movement, he made a muffled sound. His big hand closed round her thigh just above the knee and drew it up higher almost to his waist.

The movement made her aware that their bodies were joined together in the most intimate fashion. Thank heavens the room was in darkness. Her blush must be fiery by now. How wrong she had been! What a fool he must regard her! She remembered the airiness of her dismissal when he had offered to make love to her the next morning.

His warm callused fingers rested on the outer curve of her breast where his arm encircled her body. As she became aware of their pressure, she shivered, half in



ecstasy, half in embarrassment. She lay naked in his arms. The darkness made her intensely aware of his texture and shape. The curling silky hair on his chest rubbed so pleausurably against the tips of her breasts as he breathed. The smoothness of his skin over the hardness of his hipbone glided like silk against her tender inner thigh. Across the curving muscle of his bicep a raised vein throbbed gently under her fingertips.

Gently, she followed the vein with her index finger. How strong he was! How massive were his shoulders! Hours, months, years of grueling training in the arts of warfare had developed his body to its fullest extent. He could crush her almost without trying. She shuddered delicately at the thought. But he was so gentle.

A little twinge of jealousy piqued her as she realized that his skill as a lover must have been gained, as had his skill with weapons, by long practice. The unpleasant thought caused her to stir uncomfortably and try to push herself away. She pressed her palms against his chest.

His breathing altered. With a muffled groan he released her, turning over onto his back, breaking their bodies apart. She lay beside him staring upward into the darkness.

Tomorrow they would arrive in London. She would deliver the commission and then take her receipt for her gold from the Hansa merchant to carry it back to the merchant in Leeds. In this simple manner would she get her payment home. She would have little to do then but turn round and head for York with the empty wagon. The great adventure would be over.

She would bid farewell to Sir Brian de Trenanay. He would ride away out of England and out of her life. Miles and miles of land and water would separate them. To her

surprise, she felt her eyes begin to fill with tears. She was weeping. A wry smile curved the corners of her mouth in the darkness.

So this was the pain of love. This was what the romances spoke and sang of. "*Alas, my love, you do me wrong to cast me off discourteously. . . .*"

She had nursed this man, worked beside him, slept beside him, joined her body to his. And he would leave her . . . probably without so much as a backward glance. And she would return to York to be a man for the rest of her life. A painful lump swelled in her throat at the thought of never experiencing this incredible ecstasy again. With one hand she brushed at the tears that trickled down her cheeks.

For shame! To lie in the darkness crying before the hurt transpires. She took a deep breath. She would try to think on the bright side. At least she had known Brian, had loved him. Clutching that thought to her, she turned on her side facing him. His arm lay between them, warm and heavy. Since they had fallen asleep on the covers, she became aware of the chill of the room. Gently she slid her hands around his upper arm and nestled close to him to wait for sleep to claim her.

As the first rays of daylight pierced the leaded panes, Brian turned to her again, wakening her with his scratchy kisses, running insistent hands over her spare white flesh. "Again," he whispered in her ear. "Please, Gillian. The feel of you, the wonder of your body. Never . . ." He punctuated his fervent speech with kisses before lapsing into breathless French, none of which she understood after the word *chérie*.

This time he did not hesitate. His love-making was swift and eager. Almost without preliminaries he pressed

himself upon her, rose above her, and drove himself hard into her welcoming flesh. Again the ecstasy, the crescendo of heat and pressure. And the explosive release which left them both gasping as her body shuddered beneath the resurgent waves that went on and on until she feared she would lose consciousness. A cry of fear burst from her lips at the height of her climax as he loved her almost more than she could bear. When at last he allowed her to float trembling back to earth, she wrapped her long legs around his waist and cradled him in her body.

In her arms Brian lay with eyes closed almost senseless from the passionate explosion she had engendered. At the height of his fervor, he had been aware only of the exquisite pressure she exerted at his loins. Now as he felt his body's sweet satiety, his mind recalled with regret the cry that had burst from her lips as his pleasure had peaked.

God! He had never, never meant to hurt her. But oh, she was so sweet. He had seduced her last night to show her the joy of sex and ended with further seducing himself to the pleasures of her body.

Among men of his class the coarse tale existed that from scullery wench to chatelaine, all women were the same. Between the stalls or between the sheets they were all harlots who prattled of romance but sold their favors while they cooled their heated bodies. They each possessed a limited bag of tricks which were easily recognized after a few months on the circuit.

He opened his eyes lazily, staring across the soft mound of her breast at the dust motes floating in the sun's ray. How would he ever rise and press on to London? France seemed another world, neither real nor

desirable when viewed across the delicate curve which rose and fell gently with her breathing. Beneath his ear her heart thrummed steadily and surely.

A wave of unfamiliar emotion gripped him. So intense was its grasp that he felt his muscles weaken and his head spin. The music of her heart stirred him. Her heart! He wanted to awaken with that sound in his ear for the rest of his life. His hands tightened as his thumbs pressed hard onto her narrow hipbones.

She squirmed at the pain he thoughtlessly inflicted. "Brian." Her whisper chided him gently.

Instantly, he released her. "Sorry," he murmured. He slid down her body until his mouth could touch the spots and bestow the kiss of peace upon them. "Let me kiss you, *chérie*, and make all better."

He felt her chuckle. "If you kiss me, you will only begin again."

"Would that be so bad?" His kisses trailed from one point to the other. Along the way, his tongue and lips teased and aroused her flesh.

"What will the holy brothers think?"

"That they were hasty in giving up the pleasures of the world."

She pressed her thighs against his shoulders. "We will never get to London," she mourned, then gasped as his hands gripped her buttocks and lifted her.

Odd, she thought, how she could feel no embarrassment as his mouth began to caress the point of her pleasure. At almost the first touch, her whole body responded in a manner almost painful. "Brian," she pleaded. "I beg you."

His voice was muffled. Was he chuckling? "Yes, Gillian. What do you beg? Tell me, dearest girl. What do

you beg?"

She sighed as her fingers stroked through his hair cuddling him as if he were her child instead of her lover who drove her wild with his lips and tongue and teeth. As the teeth worked his sweet depredation, she moaned her answer. "I beg God to let this feeling go on forever."

Her plea went unheeded. Even as she spoke, her voice rose in ecstasy. He drove her over the peak. Swift as a swooping falcon, he pulled himself up and plunged into her again with something of wonder. He had accounted himself a lusty lover, but never had he found the inclination, much less the strength to perform again so soon. What had she done to him?

He could not get enough. Stroking slowly, he allowed the pleasure to roll over him in lazy waves. When at last he was done, he slid sideways from her body onto his stomach, breathing heavily.

Neither spoke. Gillian stared sightlessly at the folds of material that constituted the canopy overhead. Brian stared at the sun's pattern on the floor. Each was alone in thought. Weakly, he fumbled for her hand, clasped it and squeezed it.

A knock at the door disturbed them. "Gil!" Hob's voice came through the carved wooden panels. "Gil!"

"What shall I say?"

"Tell him you will be with him in a minute."

She sat up, finding the edge of the coverlet and drawing it tightly across her breasts. "What if he wants to come in?"

Galvanized into action by the thought that her disguise might be pierced, Brian leaped from the bed, staggering slightly as he hit the floor, and crossed to the door on silent feet. Gently so as not to make a sound, he slid the

bolt into place.

"I will be there in a minute, Hob," Gillian called from the bed. "Is Brian with you?"

"I cannot find him. His bed has not been slept in."

They stared at each other. Brian made motions of drinking from a mug.

"Perhaps he went off somewhere last night and got drunk," Gillian suggested. She reached for her hose, pulling them on as she spoke. "He will doubtless appear as we are setting out. He holds hard by his knightly word."

The squire rattled the bolt. "Doubtless," came his voice through the wood. "I say, Gil. Why not let a fellow in? I assure you, I am quite harmless."

While Brian fastened her breastbinder, Gillian brushed her hair and set her hat on her head. The smock dropped down into place. "Behind the door," she whispered.

Together they crossed the room with Brian gripping her arm just above the elbow. As her hand would have drawn the bolt, he spun her to face him and planted a quick kiss on her lips.

She grinned as she placed her hand on his naked chest and pushed him back against the wall. Her lips pursed as she shaped a kiss at him before sliding back the bolt and flinging the door back. "Here I am, Hob. This was the best bed I have slept in since I left York. . . ." She stepped hastily out into the hallway and closed the door behind her.

As the wagon rolled through the crowded thoroughfares of the outskirts of London, Gillian could not see enough. Her eyes darted everywhere trying to take in the

throngs of people wearing strange clothes and driving wagons, carts, and carriages the likes of which she had never seen.

"How shall we ever find where we need to go?" she exclaimed aghast. Thank heaven she was traveling with two such seasoned veterans. A passing horseman was crowded by an oncoming carriage into the side of one of the oxen. The normally placid beast lowed nervously.

"What is your guess?" Brian asked Hob's advice. He had been in London several times, but his stay had been limited to inns near the lists and temporarily erected pavilions. Not possessing goods to deliver, he had no idea where such a business might be transacted.

"Likely Cheapside," Hob replied after a brief pause. "The middles and commons deal over there. The lords and clergy, this side."

Gil listened to this pronouncement with growing trepidation. "'Tis so strange. We have come this far without knowing where we are going. I am sure Uncle Tobin knows. He has taken many a commission to London. I suppose he did not think to tell me."

Brian shifted in the saddle. "He was ill," he reminded her.

She laughed dryly. "The exact destination should have been the first thing I thought to learn. What did I expect? Someone standing eagerly at the roadside to reach out and take the oxen's bridle."

Hob listened with interest to this conversation. "I have wondered how you two came to be riding together."

"A long story." Brian straightened angrily in the saddle, the abrupt motion causing his wound to catch slightly. His sandy eyebrows drew together in a frown which he directed at the squire. "You figure prominently

in it, and not to your credit."

Hastily, Gillian interrupted this train of thought. "Night will be here soon. We need to find lodgings. Nothing can be done now. Where is this Cheapside?"

Brian's frown did not relent. "I like not the idea of staying on the south bank of the Thames. 'Tis a place of cutthroats and vagabonds. We would do better to stay in one of the inns on the northbank."

Then it was Hob's turn to protest. "I disagree. Gil, this side of the river is strewn with inns charging exorbitant prices for the same services that we can get for much less on the other side. Since the commission in all likelihood will be delivered to the other side, let us save money."

"But . . ."

Hob cut across the protest. "I know a place on the other side. In Southwark. A clean tavern . . . reasonable. Some of these places . . ." He snorted in disgust. "Just waiting to rob the unwary." He looked meaningfully at Brian.

The knight shrugged his shoulders, his lips compressing into a thin line as a sign that he would say no more.

Gil looked from one man to the other, then resolutely slapped the reins on the oxen's broad white backs. "Lead on, Hob," she called as the beasts threw their shoulders into the yokes and the wagon's pace increased slightly.

Through the noisy, filthy streets of London he led them. For Gillian, town bred though she was, the press of humanity going about its final chores before nightfall was unsettling. Everyone seemed to be rushing, with slightly furtive looks about them. Their cloaks seemed drawn more tightly than absolutely necessary. Their hats and hoods, pulled down a bit farther than ordinarily to



conceal their eyes.

Few women were about. Only at the head of one lane that led off the broad street into the heart of the city did Gillian see a couple of females. At first glance they looked little different from the wenches in the taverns she had stayed in all along the way. Why did they lounge against the corners of dirty hovels at the entrance to a cul-de-sac? Why not be about their business? Her face flushed beet red when she realized that they were about their business.

By the time Gillian was almost exhausted from the crowds and the stench, the trio finally crossed London Bridge and turned east.

"Into the slums," Brian muttered loudly enough to be heard. "I might have known."

Hob shot him a quick glance. "You ride high now, my fine French lord. But wait until you get a bit older. You will pray that places like this exist where your weary old bones will be welcome for a few pence."

"Where do we go, Hob?" Gillian glanced furtively around her as the shadows lengthened.

"To a place that I hope is still there," the man admitted. "'Tis quite a time since I stayed there. Not since my father died. But at that time it was good and clean. Good people stayed at it. People from everywhere. Nuns and priests, merchants and landowners. Knights too." He threw a glance in Brian's direction. "My father and I."

"Who owns this eminent hostelry?" Brian sneered.

"Old Harry Bailey," the squire replied. "The name of the place is the Tabard Inn."

## *Chapter Sixteen*

A bar dexter, the upper bend painted in garish red with a crude lion rampant, the lower bend divided into a field of black and white cheque, constituted the sign of the Tabard Inn.

"Amazing arms for an innkeeper," Brian sneered. "If I am not mistaken the gold lion is the royal animal."

"Old Harry never misses a trick," Hob grinned without embarrassment. "He probably took the lion because somebody who stayed here one time had a relative who knew the king's groom."

Sitting on the wagon seat between the two, Gillian giggled. More and more often, Hob seemed to be playing with Brian, teasing the seriousness and bitterness out of him, refusing to rise to the bait the Frenchman cast. Hob was a jolly fellow, Gillian decided.

The squire threw one leg over the saddle bow and slid

gracefully down to the flagstones laid in a semicircle in front of the porch. With grand insouciance he threw his reins to the glum-faced boy who received them with some reluctance. Mounting to the porch, Hob turned and spread his arms wide. "I speak for Harry when I say, 'Welcome to the Tabard Inn. The beds be cleanly, the food be hot, the wine be mellow.'"

"He probably gets a commission from the tavern keeper for everyone he brings here," Brian muttered as he dismounted on the other side of the wagon.

Shaking her head, Gillian jumped down onto the flagstones and followed Hob into the tavern. Brian trailed along behind the two of them, muttering faintly. He did not trust Englishmen in general and Hob particularly had given him no reason to change his opinion.

"Harry Bailey!" Hob bawled.

A heavy-chested man with shirt sleeves rolled back to expose forearms like small hams raised himself from a seat behind the desk in the lobby. Watery blue eyes stared expectantly at the squire. "Tell me not," he commanded. "I never forget a guest. No matter how long ago." He studied the face. His brow wrinkled as he mentally erased the lines and plucked out the gray hairs.

Behind the squire, Gillian and Brian entered, moving to the side to witness the reunion.

Suddenly, the broad rubicund face smoothed into a grin. "'Tis long years indeed since you came this way, Howard of Rothingham, but you are welcome."

For an instant Hob's grin faded. His face looked gray beneath the weathered skin. Then he recovered himself. His lips forced themselves into a rearrangement that passed for pleasant. "A very long time, Harry," he grimaced. "I have not heard that name in more than a

dozen years. Not since my father died."

Harry Bailey in turn lost his grin. "Ah, lording, how sad to hear you say such! We do pass. We all do. But one so worthy . . ." He shook his head.

The squire was silent. A glint suspiciously like tears appeared in his eyes. Almost imperceptibly he shook himself. "Not lording, Harry. No longer. I am plain Hob."

The innkeeper made a face. "Oh, no, lor—Hob. You might be Hob, but never plain Hob."

"Ah, Harry, the bloom has faded from the rose."

At this point Harry Bailey grinned, including the two who had obviously come with his old friend. "Be that like unto the romances of old, lordings? Ah, could he not spin the words right out of his mouth, and the ladies right out of the bowers? Why some nights around here he slept no more than did the nightingale."

Obviously somewhat discomfited, Hob reached out and drew Gil forward. "Enough about old times, Harry. My friends and I are weary and hungry. We travel on a king's commission and have a king's thirst. Here be my young friend, Gil Fletcher from York Minster. And this fine gentleman is Sir Brian de Trenanay of France."

Gillian made a respectful bow to the host who smiled his approval of such manners. Brian raised his eyebrows and smiled frostily.

"*Ne parlez pas anglais, monsieur?*" Harry inquired politely. "*C'est bon. Je parle français aussi.*"

Irritated at Brian's rudeness, Gil frowned. "Brian . . ."

"I speak English," Brian replied stiffly, "when there is something to speak about."

Catching Hob's expression, Gillian hastened into the breach. "We are very tired, Master Host. We came all the

way from St. Albans today. Have you rooms for us for the night?"

Beaming a broad smile at the thought of renting his rooms, the innkeeper turned back to his desk. "To be sure. You will want a private parlor and beds for the three of you. You shall have the best in my house, and at only the price you would pay if you took the poorest." He slid a glance at the knight to gauge his reaction to this generous offer. When none was forthcoming, he shrugged and turned his attention to his old friend.

"Will you take supper in my own private rooms tonight, Howard of Rothingham?"

The squire drew himself up. His eye glittered in the lantern light. "I should be honored, mine host."

"Then I shall send a boy to conduct you to your rooms. There you may wash, after which he will conduct you to my private apartments."

"Will your good wife be present?" Hob inquired as the other two followed a youth who had entered from the hall at a motion of Harry's hand.

"My wife is dead," Harry said softly.

The squire sighed. "I grieve for your loss, good friend."

"She was a good wife, all in all," Harry nodded, his face grave. "I miss her even now. Had a deal of trouble living with her. Now I find 'tis a deal more trouble living without her." He shook his head over the book on the desk as Hob turned sadly away up the stairs.

The boy opened the door to a private parlor with two connecting chambers. "This be King Henry's Chambers," he announced proudly, scratching a bright red bump on the side of his jaw. "The master always keeps them nice and fresh. Fresh straw in the mattresses, fresh linen on

the beds. Coals ready to light in the fireplace should you be needing such a thing." He stumped to the small bricked opening in the wall and peered in anxiously. Pulling his head back out, he straightened formally and recited, "Everything here for your comforts, milords."

His face lightening somewhat before the boy's earnestness, Brian slipped a farthing from his purse and pressed it into the boy's hand. "I am sure we will be very comfortable," he agreed.

When they were alone, Gillian turned to Brian. "You were rude, milord, to the host," she chided gently.

He stiffened angrily. "No more, Gillian. I warn you."

"You do not deny that these rooms are comfortable," she insisted. "Hob has gotten us here with no difficulties. 'Twas just as he said it would be. The man is obviously an old friend who is willing to give us a very reasonable rate on these rooms." She entered the bedroom to the right. "Clean sheets," she observed. "Scented with lavender and costmary. My favorite scents."

He ground his teeth. "Gillian," he protested. "I do not mean to distress you, but we will probably be murdered in our beds. If not then at the very least robbed blind. This treacherous Saxon . . ."

She sighed gustily, her expression one of tolerant boredom. "I am a Saxon of sorts, Brian. Although allow me to remind you that there really are no such things as Saxons anymore. We are English. All of us. Whether Angles, Saxons, or Jutes. We are *English*." She emphasized the word as if speaking to a deaf person.

Behind his back the door opened. Hob stepped inside, a hesitant smile on his face. "Is all to your liking, milord?"

Brian swung round. "Gil is pleased," he replied grudgingly. He allowed the remark to hang on the air, his

meaning clear without a word being spoken. He felt Gil's fingers in the middle of his back at his waist. Suddenly, she pinched him. Surprised, he started slightly.

Another boy appeared behind Hob, bearing a tray with pitcher and goblets. "Master sends some fine light ale to refresh yourselves before supper," he announced in a singsong voice.

"How very thoughtful." Gil brushed by Brian and indicated the small table before the fireplace. "Shall I pour some for all of us?" Without waiting for an answer, she splashed some clear pale liquid into the goblets and handed one in turn to each of her companions. Lifting a third for herself, she toasted them. "To friendship."

Brian scowled, but lifted his also and drank. Over the top he stared at Hob, his eyes studying the older man as if taking a new measurement. He lowered the empty cup. "Howard of Rothingham?" He raised one eyebrow.

The other flushed and turned away. "'Twas a long time ago. I had not thought Harry would have such a long memory."

"I seem to recall your mentioning someone named Giles of Rothingham," Brian continued.

"My father," the squire admitted. "He was a knight."

"Was?"

"He died. An old man rich in years and memories." As if the memory pained him even yet, Hob set down his goblet. With a short bow he excused himself, entering the other bedroom and closing the door behind him.

Angrily, Gillian whirled on Brian, who threw up his hands in mock fear. "*Mea culpa*," he begged. "I just asked him a question. How was I to know he would be so easily piqued?"

"You never think that anyone but you has feelings,"

she snapped. "You have the sensitivity of a charging boar." Pouring herself another goblet of ale, she strode into the other bedroom leaving him alone and feeling very put upon.

The dinner that night in Harry Bailey's apartments was one of the most delicious that Gillian had ever tasted. Even Brian allowed himself to unbend sufficiently to admit the wine to be of excellent French vintage. The meal consisted of roasted capons, one for each, stuffed with chestnuts, leeks, and sausage. A fine salad of spinach leaves seasoned with oil, vinegar, and garlic accompanied the meat. Hot round rolls of white bread were offered to each in turn by the serving boys.

"Good bread, good meat, good companionship," Hob commented, over his third glass of strong wine. "Ah, Harry, you do the innkeeping business proud." His tongue was slightly thick. He waved the goblet at Brian. "Saw this man set down thirty people at a time to tables just like this." He waved his hand expansively. "Still taking people to Canterbury, Harry?"

"Oh, now and again," the host beamed. "Now and again. But the groups are smaller now. The old days are going fast. Not so many people visit the holy places anymore. Thinking too much. Not keeping the faith."

"I should love to go to Canterbury someday." Gillian smiled. "I have heard all my life of blessed Saint Thomas, whose blood heals the sick."

"That it does," the host agreed quickly. "That it does. Cures the most fearsome diseases. I have seen it. I can tell you."

Brian looked skeptical. "Who is this Saint Thomas?"



"England's holy martyr Saint Thomas à Becket." Harry crossed himself piously.

"I have heard of him, now you remind me." Brian nodded. "He was a Norman Frenchman." His grin was broad and satisfied.

"His parents were Norman," Harry corrected him. "He was born right here in Cheapside."

"Even the king of England in those days was French." Brian snorted.

Rolling her eyes heavenward, Gillian poured the knight another goblet of wine. "Drink up, Sir Brian. There is still plenty here." The look she threw the other two at the table indicated that she would like to see her arrogant French escort unconscious. "Perhaps you can help us, Master Bailey?"

"For you, young gentleman and friend of my friend, I am at your disposal."

"I am a fletcher from York, come all this distance with Brian and Hob as escorts to deliver a commission of arrows to the king's quartermaster. I was not supposed to make the delivery at all, but my uncle grew desperately ill and so it fell to my lot." She smiled ruefully. "The only thing is . . . I do not know where to make the delivery. I am utterly stupid. Were it not for my good fortune in meeting these two, I might be wandering the streets of London tonight searching vainly for I know not what."

Harry Bailey nodded sagely. "Many a one comes to town and does not know where to go," he comforted her. "Hob steered you right though in bringing you to me. Little happens on either side of the Thames that I do not hear about."

"Then you know where I may take my load."

"Go east to Greenwich," Harry advised. "King Henry

marshals his forces there while he readies them."

"Readies them for what?" Brian roused to ask suspiciously.

Harry Bailey turned a bland face in his direction. "I really cannot say, lording. The king has not deigned to stay at the Tabard this month."

Brian subsided and buried his face behind his wine goblet.

"The commission was a large one," Gillian offered after a slight silence. "Quite the largest we were ever given. If bowyers and fletchers all over England were given orders of the same size, something important must be going to happen."

The three men nodded in agreement, while each considered his own private reasons. Harry Bailey contemplated with pleasure the extra customers a general marshaling of men and supplies would mean for his business. A broad smile spread across his face as he signaled one of the boys to refill each drink in turn.

Hob considered the possibility that he might find a position in the retinue of some lord close to the king. A high placement in some noble household might offer him a chance at easier living. He calculated that he was getting too old for the tourney circuit with its chancy fortunes to be made, but more importantly lost, in the lists.

Brian de Trenanay welcomed the trip to Greenwich to take note of the preparations. Should the English king be arming for a major campaign, he could listen to the talk and discover what were the army's strengths and weaknesses. Although he despised himself for any violation of his knightly oaths, he could satisfy his conscience by reminding himself that he had sworn fealty to the Dauphin.

"Did you go to Canterbury with Harry Bailey?" Gillian interrupted their thoughts.

The squire smiled. "Aye, that I did. My father and I. I had just turned twenty. I was hoping to get a battlefield commission the next place we went. My father was bound for Canterbury. He had an old wound that was bothering him and a pain from time to time in his shoulder and arm. Near to forty-five was my father," he explained.

"But a strong man." Harry interceded. "And wonderfully polite. A gentle, perfect knight."

Brian sat up a bit straighter at this compliment to one of his own kind. "All knights should be," he agreed.

"All men should be." Harry nodded sagely. "But many are not."

Brian threw the host a suspicious glance, but the man's rubicund face remained bland as white pudding.

Across the table Gillian coughed slightly as she stared into the bowl of her wine goblet.

"I am concerned with knights," Brian insisted. "We all take oaths by which we swear fealty to God and to our sovereign lords. No man should become a knight if he cannot hold fast to his word."

"But some do," Harry argued quietly. "However, Sir Giles of Rothingham was not such a one. He was true."

"He was a man," the squire interposed softly. "All in all, with a man's strengths and a man's weaknesses." He closed his eyes as his mouth thinned into a hard line as if to shut out the memories.

"But why did you not become a knight?" Harry questioned gently. "I know such a position for you must have been your father's dearest wish."

Howard of Rothingham shrugged his shoulders. In the

flickering light he looked older than his forty-two years . . . and very tired. "He died before we ever fought again," he sighed. "He should have quit long before he did, but he wanted to go on. He had fought on the circuit for years, until he got too old. Too many young ones knocking him off his horse. He began to lose too often. Someone was bound to keep his armor. So he went to work as a mercenary as long as he was able."

"Hired his sword?" Brian's voice was grim.

Hob's blue eyes flashed in defiance. "So long as he was able," he repeated. "To last until he could get me a chance at a battlefield commission. We fought for Christian and for Moslem. From Spain to Russia. But we always fought fair."

"Mercenaries!" Brian spat the word.

"Is not the tourney circuit a fight for pay proposition?" The squire faced his adversary squarely.

"Prizes," Brian flung back at him.

The squire made a rude noise. "Pay!" he insisted.

"The tourneys keep a knight's skills sharp and give him a chance to work out against the best of his kind. The prizes are just extra. No one really cares about their monetary value, just the honor of the thing."

"Tourney *were* a way to keep knights busy and out of trouble between wars," Hob argued. "Then they got too big and dangerous, so the church outlawed them. Now all they really are is tilting in the lists, but still the men get hurt and killed. You, for example. You almost died. I thought you were dead. When they carried you off that field with your side split open, I had never seen a man survive a wound like that. If you had not bled to death, the lockjaw would have killed you within a few days."

"You can always find ways to excuse your dishonorable behavior," Brian snarled angrily. "Fight for pay, steal from a 'dying' man, ride with rogues."

"Be quiet!" Gillian interrupted, her voice cutting across the argument. "This argument will not be resolved. Brian. Hob. Both of you are not to discuss this again. When two men think each is right and the other is wrong, then they cannot see each other's side at all. You both have much to thank each other for. Forget the past and let these things be bygone."

"Well spoken, young Gil," Harry Bailey applauded. "You are both right and both wrong, lordings. I bid you make peace between yourselves and stand together. All need friends in this world, not enemies."

"This Frenchman"—Hob emphasized the word in a way calculated to raise Brian's ire—"this Frenchman will never be satisfied until he has laid me under the sod."

"You left me to die," Brian snarled.

"I left you for dead. There is a difference."

Both men rose from their chairs. Brian was half a head taller than the squire and close to ten years younger. His hard hands flexed as they itched to bring the matter to a head. The Englishman, as Gillian insisted on calling him, would finally get his reward for his treachery.

Hob squared his shoulders. His jaw firmed. No coward he. The Frenchman would not emerge from this fight unscathed. The sight of the massive shoulders and heavily muscled chest revealed to him that he had no chance of winning, but he knew a trick or two. This knight who prated so about honor and prizes might not stand well against one who had actually fought for his life. The rules did not apply on the battlefield. He stepped

around from behind the table.

"No!" The host and the fletcher exclaimed in the same instant.

"Have you lost your minds, both of you?" Gil continued, her voice shrill with fear. These two had changed before her eyes. The killing look was upon them.

"Keep out of this, Gil." Brian moved her aside as easily as if she had been a child.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

With a mocking bow Howard of Rothingham stepped aside to allow Brian to precede him from the private apartments. Brian glowered fiercely, his brows drawn together as he regarded the man whom he could not forgive.

"Brian." Gil caught at his arm again. "Please stop this nonsense. You are being foolish."

"Foolish!" he snarled. His voice was slightly slurred from the effect of the drink.

"Listen to yourself! You are reeling drunk." Like a small fury she placed herself in front of him, pushing hard against his chest. Proving the truth of her words, he staggered back. His hip banged against the side of the table, and he careened off it, grabbing for Hob's shoulder to steady himself.

The shorter man caught at Brian's elbow and steadied

him upright. Realizing his would-be opponent's condition, the squire cast Gillian a tolerant glance over the massive shoulder.

She smiled apologetically. Her long association with Brian had created a sense of responsibility. He was her knight. She acknowledged her affection that could very easily strengthen into something more, if she would allow herself to care, or if she were unable to control the mounting passion and affection she felt. Gently, her hand slipped around Brian's waist.

Haughtily albeit unsteadily, the knight straightened himself and brushed his enemy aside. "Tripped," he muttered, staring down at the floor to find the object that had thrown him so foully.

"Brian." Gil ducked under his arm and came up with it over her shoulder. "Let me help you to the chamber that Harry has kindly provided. You must be exhausted from the travel today."

"No!" he muttered. "Not too tired to take the skin off this varlet." He glared at Hob, who stepped back behind the table, his thumbs hooked nonchalantly in his belt.

"Any time," the squire smiled pleasantly. "I will be here in the morning, Sir Brian. Perhaps a good night's sleep may serve to give you a new outlook on life."

"No!"

But Gillian was already drawing him toward the door.

"Well, perhaps. Sleep tonight," Brian flung over his shoulder. "Challenge at dawn."

One hand on the latch, Gillian looked up at him. "We have to leave early in the morning, Brian, to take the commission to Greenwich. Maybe you and Hob should plan it for a later date." Her brown eyes were soft and glowing as she raised them to him.



Forgetting that she was in disguise, he smiled down at her. "Anything you say, my pretty Gil."

Before she could prevent him, his mouth swooped down to plant a kiss somewhere in the vicinity of her mouth. Frantically, she pushed his face away staggering back as his tottering weight was thrown off balance. Another minute and her identity would be pierced. She made a grab for the latch.

"Need any help?" Hob's voice sounded concerned.

Perhaps the kiss had gone unnoticed. Brian's shoulders should have shielded her from view. Perhaps the words 'my pretty Gil' might be taken innocently. She lowered her voice as much as she could. "No. I can manage him. He really got too drunk tonight. I should have suggested that we not drink that last round."

Harry Bailey came around on her side and opened the door. "You are not his keeper, young lording," he reminded her kindly.

"He helped me," she argued. "I could not have made the trip alone."

"A fine and loyal lad." Harry tipped an imaginary hat to her. "A good sleep to you tonight. To you both." He patted the knight's shoulder as the two swayed and staggered through the door and out into the hallway.

As the door closed behind Harry, Brian's mouth caressed her ear. "Make love to you now. Kill him later," he slurred.

"You are impossible," she hissed, glancing furtively over her shoulder to assure herself that they were not being observed.

"Know what I like," he insisted. "Like you. Nobody else like you. Be my squire, Gillian. Take care of you always."

They arrived at the door of their apartment. Ignoring his questing mouth and roaming hands, she let them inside and closed the door thankfully behind her.

Immediately, his hands closed round her body. So slender was she that his arms completely encircled her rib cage allowing the strong callused fingers to press seductively against the sides of her breasts. His warm mouth, tasting headily of wine, closed over her own. The kiss was deep and seemed to go on a long time.

Then he chuckled deep in his throat and pulled his mouth away with a loud smack. "There," he said. "See how well I make love to you." His smile was fatuous as he swayed slightly almost succeeding in tugging her off balance with him.

Taking advantage of his tipsy state, she guided him across the private parlor to the room where they were to sleep that night. Lowering his weight onto the bed, she bent to pull off his boots. As soon as his head touched the pillow, he was asleep. As the last boot came off, a muffled grunt followed by a snore announced to her that he was out for the night.

With a grin, she rolled him over on his side and covered him lightly. "Sleep well, Brian," she whispered. His face was youthful and flushed in the candlelight. An impulse overcame her. Gracefully, she stooped to plant a kiss on his forehead. When he stirred slightly, brushing at her as if the touch of her lips tickled him, she drew back in embarrassment. But no one had seen her and he did not wake.

How she hated to leave him! How she wished he could somehow return with her to York. *If wishes were horses . . .* His world lay across the channel with the pomp and panoply of knighthood. Hers lay in the dim

recesses of her shop. Closing her eyes against the pain the thought of parting gave her, she touched her lips where they had brushed his forehead. He would never know, she promised herself. She would ride away in the morning before he awakened. When he awoke she would be long gone on her way to Greenwich. Without reason to follow her, his promise accomplished, he would ride away toward France and think of her after a while, if he remembered her at all, as a pleasant bedfellow.

The road to the borough of Greenwich took her away from the city of London and the Thames. Away from the Tabard Inn she guided the sleepy oxen, past the Bell. So early in the morning did the wagon creak over the bumpy cobblestones, that not a man was to be seen starting home from his night of pleasure.

Half asleep, the end of the long trip in sight, Gillian dozed on the wagon seat. Neither of her companions had been in any condition to rise when she had deemed the time was right for her to leave. Overcome with melancholy after the events of last night, she felt she could not face them when she departed lest she embarrass herself by bursting into unmanly tears and exposing her sex to Hob.

A very sleepy innkeeper had given her somewhat confusing directions into Greenwich, assuring her that the way was clearly marked. If she became lost, anyone could direct her, he promised. So she drove alone, feeling exceedingly tired and experiencing an encroaching weariness, resulting she was sure from the abnormal demands she had made on her body, along with a general depression now that her quest was almost ended. Stifling

a yawn, she slapped the reins across the rumps of the team.

Never varying their pace, nor flicking a placid ear, they moved along steadily through the silent lanes. As they neared the Thames, banks of silvery mist stirred around their knees, hiding the roadbed from her eyes. A strange feeling of loneliness sent cold prickles along her spine. She was the only person in this silent floating world. Kenneth and Uncle Tobin—York itself, the shop—seemed more like a dream than ever. What was she doing here so far from home, so solitary in this strange muffled atmosphere?

A grim gray building rose out of the mist beyond several rows of thatched-roof neighborhoods. Within the neighborhoods people began to go about their daily business of cleaning, cooking, caring for livestock, opening the doors of their shops. As the brightening sun burned away the mist, the lane began to fill with vehicles and pedestrians.

Gillian welcomed the change. Concentrating on weaving the oxen in and out of the traffic took all her attention, keeping her mind off the companions she was leaving behind.

Grunting placidly, a drove of swine meandered across the road. As the oxen moved on unperturbed through their numbers, the smaller animals scattered. The swineherd shook his fist at Gillian, cursing her in a patois unfamiliar to her north of England ears.

Probably just as well, she thought as she ignored his imprecations. A couple of horsemen approaching from the other direction received his ire as their horses drove the now frightened pigs back across the way, scattering them hopelessly. Their grunts turned to squeals.

One horsemen pulled his mount as the animal reared in alarm when one small piglet, its tiny tail upraised ran noisily between its legs. When the rider brought his mount down, his thin face was even with Gillian's.

Ranulf of Briarthwaite!

Hastily she pulled her cap down over her eyes and snapped her whip over the oxen's backs. As familiar to her as the face of the devil in the Christmas morality plays was the face of the man who jerked his horse's head aside and guided it onward through the swirling traffic. His thin dark face unbearded, its dark eyes slitted against the rising sun, he surely had not recognized her in that brief minute. When last they had met, he had only seen her face for a few minutes.

Nevertheless, a chill of foreboding hunched her shoulders. She ducked her head, refusing to look behind her until the thud of hooves faded. Best get the business behind her and head back for York. She would have to make the journey quite alone. At least, she knew the places to stay and could make good time with the empty wagon.

The sight of yeomen archers in motley, but with the badge of Lancaster sewn on their caps, encouraged Gillian. She was nearing her destination. The great gray building!

Ahead of her in the lane were several wagons such as hers. A line began to form. The king must be preparing for a great expedition indeed. Gillian's blue eyes gazed in wonder at the enormous wagonloads of supplies which preceded her and began to close in behind her.

Never in her experience had she seen so many men and animals. Certainly, never in York, on its most crowded fair day, had so many people assembled in one place. The

noise made by cursing men and bawling grunting animals intimidated her. The stench of sweating bodies and piles of manure made her feel faint. She hesitated to open her mouth or try to draw a deep breath. Close to the river, the steamy heat of the day added to the discomfort and tempers.

An hour crept by, then two. She slumped listlessly, half sick on the wagon seat. Without food or water she realized she had planned very poorly. Ruefully, she grinned at herself. How stupid to start off in such a hurry to be away from the Tabard Inn that she neglected to eat or provide for herself.

Finally, her stomach growling, her mouth as dry as dust, she drove the oxen through the palisade into the inner court. From that moment men accustomed to the business of receiving goods took over. With bored efficiency they consulted their lists, inventoried the goods, consulted again, signed and countersigned, delegated others to unload the wagon, and directed her to a stone depot erected in the center of the bailey.

There like a king on his throne sat Johannes Gisze, the Hansa banker. An appreciative smile turned up the corners of Gillian's mouth for the first time that wretched day. The problem of handling payment in gold for the commission was eliminated by the League which had companies in London and outlying large cities in England including Leeds. Apart from a small percentage paid into her hand for the journey home, the gold for her goods delivered would never be her responsibility.

Without preliminary greetings, the German held out his square hand with its stubby fingers. Into it she placed the written receipt for the bows and arrows she had cared for and carried for so long. Without comment he

recorded figures and names in various places on hand-copied documents.

Efficiently, he pushed the documents toward her and extended the quill. Gillian signed where he indicated by stabbing at the bottom of the pages with his blunt index finger. "*Ist gut.*" He folded one over and over until no edges were left exposed. With hot wax he sealed the flap he had created by the intricate process. Finally, he buried a heavy seal in the soft glob and pushed the packet across the desk.

"I want ten pounds in small coins for the return trip," Gillian insisted when he would have closed his book and begun to motion her away.

The banker frowned in a disapproving way before drawing a metal box from beneath his desk. "I must make changes in the letters," he growled in heavily accented English. "Why did you not ask for this before?"

Shaking her head apologetically, Gillian shrugged. "I did not know . . . I . . . 'Tis my first time to deliver the commission and deal with the Hansa." She smiled slightly. "Everyone says that you are completely fair and honest."

Gisze looked at her suspiciously from beneath heavy-lidded eyes. "We are honest," he nodded. "We are more honest than the Church. Like priests we live. The English King Henry does well to build us this fine depot here. We assure fair profit for everyone."

While Gillian smiled her most angelic smile, the banker counted out her money and slipped it into the leather purse she drew from beneath her loose smock. "Thank you."

"*Bitte,*" came the gruff reply. Not a suggestion of smile flickered across the square face. Already the heavy-

lidded eyes were studying the face of the man who had come up behind her.

With a great weight lifted from her slender shoulders, Gillian suddenly longed for the opportunity to shout for joy. She had done it. She, a girl, had done what many men had not.

How she longed to share her feeling of accomplishment with someone! Her thoughts turned wistfully to her brother Kenneth and Uncle Tobin at home in York. Was her uncle recovering? Was Kenneth managing to keep everything in order and operating smoothly?

As the oxen ambled slowly out of the palisade, she regarded their white rumps disgustedly. Why could the beasts not hurry? Surely the now empty wagon should move more quickly. She cracked the long whip above their backs to be rewarded only with the slightest increase in speed.

The trip home would indeed be a long one, she realized.

Where was Brian? Was he thinking of her? Had he dismissed her from his mind and ridden away in the direction of France after his head had stopped aching this morning? She smiled to herself remembering the nights when he had drunk too much.

A shiver of regret coursed down her spine. She would never forget him. Before she realized what she was about, a tear trickled down her cheek. How would she sleep without Brian beside her tonight? She had become so used to his warmth; she dreaded the chill and the loneliness. As Gil Fletcher she would never know another man.

But she knew she would never want another. Despite his stubbornness, despite his narrow-mindedness, despite his prejudice against the people he called "Saxons," the integrity and generosity of Brian de Trenanay had won



her heart. A man of unstained honor, he manifested everything that her youthful dreams had ever created.

*Mucro Mors Cristo.*

Another shudder as she felt her nipples harden remembering the first night he had loved her, when he had commanded her to rub the warm gold over her breasts. Another tear slipped down her cheek as she paid little attention to where the oxen meandered.

If only he had cared to pursue the craft, he could have been a fine fletcher. Although his hands were heavily callused, they possessed great dexterity. His whole superbly trained body obeyed his every command perfectly. She sighed, remembering the rippling muscles of the massive back and shoulders. How she had caressed them while he had moaned with pleasure!

She would almost be willing to be his squire. The outrageous idea whispered through her mind like the hiss of the tempter serpent. With genuine regret she shook her head. The problems of posing as a man were enormous in the controlled environment of her own home in York with Uncle Tobin and Kenneth to intercede between her and accidental company. The problems would only be compounded by accompanying a man in close proximity to other men where bathing, dressing, sleeping, all the most intimate of body functions were carried on without thought of privacy. Her disguise would be penetrated in no time at all. Thereafter she would become the prey of lustful men whenever Brian's back was turned. And if he should be killed or seriously wounded . . .

She was approaching the turn into the lane leading back to the Tabard Inn. Should she take the turn or go farther? The shadows were lengthening. Whether Brian still lodged there or not, she needed a place to stay the

night. Tugging at the reins she swung the oxen's heads.

As she did so, a horseman urged his mount into the road. Startled, Gillian stared hard at the figure. "What? . . ."

On both sides of the wagon, she heard the scuffle of rushing footsteps. As she half-rose from the seat, they were upon her. Rough hands grasped her arms and tugged her upright.

"Get away!" she gasped. "Let me go! You have no right!" Realizing that her words were availing her nothing, she raised her voice. "Help!"

Only one cry could she utter before a man threw his arm around her neck and pressed his forearm into her throat, effectively and painfully silencing her.

Weak with fear, she ceased her struggles. Her eyes focused on the mounted figure in the road ahead. "I have no gold," she managed to rasp as the man guided his mount past the oxen and came even with the wagon seat. "Only a few pounds and the team. Take them if you will, but let me go."

A soft chuckle answered her. "Oh, I was sure you did not have money," the dark figure replied.

Ranulf of Briarthwaite had recognized her. For added surety he must have known about the Tabard Inn from Hob's conversation while in Ranulf's company. Too weak or cowardly to try to attack them together, he had watched and waited until they separated. She found cold comfort in the fact that she could not have known of his intentions. As frightened as she had ever been in her life and utterly helpless, she waited.

The wait was incredibly short. "Tie his hands," came the barked command.

Immediately, a rough rope was wrapped around her

wrists and knotted so tightly it wrung a pained protest from her.

"Careful," Ranulf cautioned, his voice silky. "Do not bruise the tender flesh. So young and fair a lad would bruise most easily."

"I have nothing," Gil repeated, her voice thin and high with fear.

For answer Ranulf made another gesture with his arm. Another pair of men rode out of the dark. One led a mount. "Take him in front of you," he ordered the slighter of the two riders.

"No," Gil protested. "No, please. I really have nothing but this old wagon. I am worth nothing. Please."

Unceremoniously, ignoring her protests, the one whose arm encircled her neck urged her to the side of the wagon. One of the riders guided his mount alongside. A rough hand slipped under her thigh and tossed her astraddle. The rider's arms went round her.

"Make a sound," Ranulf warned her, "and Wat will throttle you. A most unpleasant experience, believe me."

The horses cantered forward into the pitch blackness away from the direction in which she was traveling, away from the Tabard Inn, away from Brian and Hob and Harry Bailey. A sob escaped her. Terrified, she bowed her head as the man who held her spurred his horse into a gallop to keep abreast of Ranulf.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

The man called Wat thrust out his foot and sent Gillian sprawling headfirst into the dark room. With her hands bound behind her, she could not break her fall. The wind whooshed from her lungs as she fell flat, her shoulder slamming into the leg of a heavy piece of furniture. Above and behind her she heard his harsh laugh.

"Gently, Wat." A flint struck fire and a lantern's light illuminated what she feared would be her torture chamber. Remembering the whip marks on Brian's chest, she lay too terrified to whimper. If she pretended to be unconscious, she might postpone . . .

Ranulf grasped her shoulder and rolled her over into the light. Her cap fell off disclosing the pale yellow hair cut in the boyish bob to curl like soft feathers around her face. He knelt beside her running his hand down her upper arm before resting it on her hipbone. Since her

hands were bound beneath her body, her entire pelvis thrust upward prominently.

"You may leave us, Wat," Ranulf purred, running his thumb gently over the bone. "I expect most of the fight has been knocked out of this fine archer."

With a dry chuckle of agreement, the henchman sauntered out, closing the door behind him. Brown eyes wide and pleading, Gillian watched him leave. Almost paralyzed she turned her gaze on Ranulf, who grinned pleasantly, his teeth flashing whitely in his face.

"Such big brown eyes," he remarked, gently touching her cheek. "Such big, terrified, brown eyes. Like a fawn. You need not be afraid of me, little wild thing. I only seek to tame you to my hand." His voice was soft and crooning, like a woman's. He slid his arm under her shoulder and helped her to a sitting position.

"Wat was a brute to you," he continued, massaging the shoulder that had slammed against the table leg. "Of course, you were quite rough with his cousin, you know."

Gillian swallowed. "I? . . ." she croaked.

"Oh, yes, you." Ranulf's grip tightened painfully on the bruised flesh causing her to wince away from him. "He was the man you shot in the leg when you gallantly rescued your huge friend. Had an awful time, did Wat's cousin. Almost died. Wat was up day and night nursing him and cursing you."

"I . . . I am truly sorry. . . ." she hesitated.

Ranulf's fingers encircled her throat, drawing her toward him again. "Of course, you are. Never believed for an instant that you were not. Still you might remember that Wat would love to get his hands on you. I really had quite a time keeping him from abusing you

more than he did." His beardless chin nuzzled her cheek.

A shudder ran through her. Her flesh crawled at the touch of this man. The horror was compounded by the knowledge that he believed she was a boy. Her vision blurred. In another instant she would faint if he continued to touch her in this dreadful familiar manner.

"Please, sir," she whimpered twisting away from his lips. "Please, sir, I have not drunk nor eaten since last night. I am weak from hunger." If he left the room, she might have a chance of wriggling free and escaping.

"Poor dear boy," Ranulf murmured, lifting her to her feet. He placed a hand familiarly around her hip and patted her buttock. Hastily, she stumbled away. He grinned unpleasantly. In his experience, young boys such as this one frequently hated his touch at first, but they soon came round.

Taking a coil of rope from the bench drawn up to the table, he looped it through the bonds around her wrists. Her spirits sinking, Gillian turned to face him, her head thrown back in an outwardly defiant stance which she was far from adopting inwardly. Their pupils dilated so her brown eyes appeared almost black with tiny pin-points of light reflected from the lantern. Unblinking she surveyed her captor.

Ranulf's grin deepened as he wrapped the coil of rope round and round his hand shortening her leash. "Ah, at last the true colors begin to show. You thought to fool me into leaving the room so you might escape. You pretended to be weak and terrified. But I remembered you standing with your bow drawn, the arrow aimed at my heart. I shall certainly have to punish you for that."

He led her to the fourposter bed in a dark alcove of the room. When her steps faltered and she sought to resist,

he merely exerted his superior strength and spun her around. At last standing her up against one of the bedposts, he tied her to it, looping the rope tightly through her bonds and knotting it at her back.

"Now, wait here for me, sweet." He stood in front of her, hands on his hips surveying her with pleasure. "I will return with food and wine to break your fast. You must have all your strength. Furthermore, it is my duty to see to your comfort. You are my guest." With a mocking bow, he left her.

Even as the door closed, Gillian began to twist futilely at her bonds. The left wrist felt a little looser than the right. She pulled and tugged, desperately trying to press the heel of her hand and her thumb into her palm so the rope would slip off.

It was coming. Only a fraction of an inch more would slip the knot over the big knuckle at the base of her thumb. She could feel hot moisture flowing over her hand. She was bleeding. Only a fraction of an inch . . . Setting her teeth against the pain, she pulled with all her strength. Suddenly, the hand came free, tearing the skin off her knuckle.

Instead of crying out as she would have done a few weeks ago, she let fly with one of Brian's particularly vivid curses. It seemed to help. Spinning around, she set her fingers to the task of freeing her other hand. The knots were now tightened, so she could not budge them. Blood trickled off her thumb, making her grip slippery. Sobbing in frustration, she bent and tackled the tangle with her teeth.

Dear God! Please . . . It was so tight. She could taste her own blood and sweat on the rope. Please . . .

The door opened behind her. Instantly, she swung

around, her heart pounding. Tears sparkled in her eyes at the sight of her captor leering at her from the doorway.

Face alight with malicious pleasure, Ranulf motioned Wat to set a tray down on the table. With a malevolent glance at Gillian now braced upright against the bedpost, the henchman departed again.

Alone the two stared at each other. With subtle menace Ranulf uncoiled the whip he wore slung over his shoulder and under his armpit. Raising his arm in her direction, he snapped the leather violently.

Terrified, Gillian spun around, straining frantically at the remaining bond. The man was crazy! And here she stood tied like an animal at the slaughter block.

Behind her the leather cracked again, the tip slashing so close to her ear that she could feel the rush of air. Involuntarily, she winced away, then scrambled onto her knees on the bed to put the post between her and Ranulf.

"How appropriate!" He chuckled delightedly. "On your knees in bed." He moved inexorably toward her. The whip lashed across the end of the bed when she would have thrust her legs over the footboard. In terror, she drew her legs under her.

Frantically, she ducked her head behind the protection of the post and tried again with her teeth to tear loose the knots. Tears of fear and pain streamed from her eyes as the futility of her struggles sank home to her.

Then Ranulf's hand clutched a handful of her fair hair jerking her backward. The fragile face, deathly pale, glistening with sweat and tears and contorted with terror excited him almost beyond control. He burned and throbbed to penetrate that virginal flesh, to impose his will, to conquer this fresh innocence.

Determined to go down fighting, Gillian twisted her



head to sink her teeth into his wrist. Like a bulldog she bit, grinding her teeth to reach the tendons. The hot salt blood welled into her mouth.

Screaming like a woman, Ranulf chopped his fist at her temple, stunning her temporarily. With her jaws relaxed he was able to pull his wrist from between her teeth. Instead of deterring him from his purpose, the pain acted as a spur for his already overexcited sexuality. Her body, struggling feebly between his legs, rubbed against the insides of his thighs. Her hip twisted sideways thrusting against his protuberant manhood. He could no longer control himself. With a shuddering cry he exploded, falling forward upon her, both of them fully clothed.

Only the heavy breathing of the two broke the silence for several minutes. As her senses returned, Gillian began to struggle again, pushing at Ranulf's heavy body, ignorant that the danger was over for a few minutes at least.

His passion spent, Ranulf allowed himself to be rolled away onto the bed where he lay staring up at the ceiling. In a few moments rage and disgust would assert themselves, but for now he rested. His body felt drained, yet not satisfied. Cynically amused, he wondered at himself and the attraction this youth had for him.

Panting, her head reeling with pain, Gillian slid her legs over the foot of the bed. With the bedpost between her and Ranulf, she bent again to free her wrist. But the sight drove her back, trembling in despair. Her right hand was a purplish blue to the fingertips. A roll of puffy flesh smeared with blood stood out around the cutting rope. The knot was almost buried beneath it. Only a knife wielded with great care could free her.

Drawing a deep breath, she looked at the man sprawled

on the bed. The expression on his face made her shudder. Through slitted lids the opaque eyes studied her, while the thin lips curled back in a vulpine grin. Ranulf propped himself lazily on one elbow.

"Given up, my pretty sweetbrier?" he asked silkily, his voice soft and husky. "Your poor little hand must be hurting dreadfully. But it will hurt much more when I finally release you. So I think that for now you must stay as you are." He spoke as if explaining something to a child.

Thoroughly enjoying himself, he punched the bolster up under his head and straightened his body on the bed. Between his booted feet, he stared at the pale slight figure. "What is your name?"

Instead of answering, Gil tried to slip her index fingernail under the rope to relieve some of the tingling pain which tormented her whole arm.

Lazily, Ranulf reached for the whip where it snaked about on the bed. "Answer me!" he barked.

"Gil Fletcher," came the hoarse reply. Gillian's throat was so dry, she could barely form the words.

"Ah, yes. The little archer. Are you also the arrow-maker?"

"Yes."

"How interesting! 'Tis obvious you have mastered the craft as well as the use of the product. Wat's cousin can testify to that."

Gillian opened her mouth to protest, then closed it without speaking. She had no answer. Brian had been in danger. The man had tried to attack her. She had shot him. She would do so again if she were confronted with a similar situation. Furthermore, she knew if the situation had been reversed, Ranulf or any of his men would not

have been content with merely wounding her but would have killed her without compunction.

Ranulf waited a few moments eying the upright figure, the thrust of the defiant chin. Already he could feel himself hardening slightly. How exciting the youth was! How defiant! What hours and hours of pleasure awaited him! He licked his lips in anticipation.

"Take off those garments," he commanded.

"Go to hell!"

"Do not be foolish, my young sweetbrier. I intend to have you naked in my bed for days to come. The sooner you strip for me, the sooner you will have that painful rope removed from your wrist. I can even have a pan of cold water brought for you to plunge your hand in when it is released. The pain will be so intense that you will need some little help to stand it."

She swayed on her feet, reaching out blindly for the bedpost to steady herself. She must not faint, but the pain and her own hunger and thirst were fast overwhelming her.

Ranulf swung his legs leisurely over the side of the bed and came around to put his arm familiarly across her shoulders. Beneath his hand, he felt her shudder with revulsion. He almost smelled her fear along with the cleanly odor of her hair. Tenderly, he gathered her back against his chest, guiding the fainting head beneath his chin. With arms encircling her he began to undo the leather belt at her waist.

"No. Oh, no," she whispered faintly.

For answer she felt Ranulf's lips brush her temple where only moments before he had struck her. "Such a defiant little fighter," he murmured.

The belt dropped to the floor under their feet.

His long fingernails delicately scored the skin around her navel and up under her ribcage. Again she shuddered, as this new misery added to the pain that already wracked her. "Please, sir . . ."

Pressing his palms against her ribs, he rubbed them upward expecting to find the flat casement of a male. Instead, he encountered the swathe of linen about her breasts. Puzzled he ran his fingers along its lower edge. "Have you been wounded, sweetbrier?" he asked, surprising concern in his voice.

She rolled her head helplessly on his chest. "No. Oh, no. Please, please let me go."

Finding the ties at the back, he unfastened them, unwrapping her and letting the cloth fall to the floor. At last his hands closed over the swollen mounds. He stiffened, unable to believe what he had found.

Devoid of sensuality as if he had been doused with cold water, he squeezed them painfully. To his horror he embraced a female!

Ranulf spat an oath so foul that she could only guess at its meaning. Furiously, he pushed her away to sprawl half on the bed. "A woman! A female!" His voice rose shrilly. "Why did you not disclose yourself?"

As she lay there almost in a stupor, Gillian herself was hard put to think why she had not immediately told him. Only long habit, the rigorous conditions she had set for herself to maintain her identity at all costs, had prevented her. Why had she not? Oh, why had she not stood on the wagon and declared herself? *Unhand me, sirs, I am a woman.*

Fear was her answer. The men's garments were a shield in ordinary instances against that most horrible of all atrocities—rape. A woman whose body had been well

loved loathed the thought of rape as much or more than the ignorant virgin. Of what Ranulf of Briarthwaite had planned for her had she been the lad he thought her, she had no conception. Not the slightest hint had ever been dropped before her of what men did to other men. Caught between the prospect of two evils, she had chosen to avoid the devil she knew rather than the one she could only guess at.

Behind her, she dimly heard the growling, cursing voice continuing. A stunning blow caught her left buttock, booting her higher onto the bed as it sent pain rocketing up her spine. She grunted hoarsely, unable to make more response from her parched throat. He had kicked her.

Possessed of rage so great he could not contain it, her captor grabbed her shoulders, dragging her from his bed and off onto the floor where she hung upright by her abused wrist. A slash of the rope that bound her to the bedpost left her sprawling limply at his feet. Again the boot rolled her over on her stomach. A quick twist of the rope and her left wrist was again bound to the right one.

He grasped her hair and jerked her head up again. "You!" he spat into her face. "You dare to trick me. You do not deceive me and escape."

As he let go her hair, he pushed downward to fling her from him. The point of her chin struck the floor. Blessedly, she lost consciousness.

Unfortunately, her oblivion was short-lived. When the man called Wat caught her by her bound wrists to drag her to her feet, the searing pain made her cry out.

"Conscious, is she?" Ranulf's voice had resumed its icy silkiness.

"She whimpers like she is," Wat's reply was deep with satisfaction.

"Good. Good. Push the little slut down into that chair and let her hear exactly what I have planned for her and for that monstrous brute she was whoring for."

Barely conscious, her stomach roiling, Gillian was pushed down into the chair. When she would have fallen sideways, Wat's hard hand held her upright.

"Give her a drink of ale," Ranulf commanded. "Not that I want to relieve your suffering," he hastened to inform her. "I merely want you revived enough to know what is happening."

His blurred face finally came into focus over the top of the mug as Gillian swallowed the bitter ale. "You, my girl, will disappear tonight. I would offer you to my men." Here he glanced at Wat significantly. "But they are all too discriminating to sully themselves with a whore, no doubt from the army's tail if you were following a knight."

Wat lowered the mug grinning as he waited for her to beg for mercy. Too exhausted to realize what was happening, Gillian disappointed them both by merely listening dazedly.

"The ship of a very good friend of mine is outward bound across the channel this very night for France," Ranulf continued, his eyes studying her avidly for signs of terror and pleas for reprieve. "He owes me several favors and will be glad to repay by giving passage to an extra cabin boy." The word *boy* spat from between his tight lips.

"Then Wat will drive your oxen close to the Tabard Inn where your knight and his squire are still staying.

They will come looking for you, suspecting rightly that you have met with foul play. I will arrange to leave clues that will lead them here, but not too quickly nor too obviously. They will work for more than forty-eight frantic hours trying to find you. They will be exhausted and upset—careless—when they arrive. We will be waiting for them.” He laughed nastily as he helped himself to the ale.

Wat chuckled also, his hand tightening on her upper arm.

“What say you to that?” Ranulf prodded.

Gillian cleared her throat. The ale had dampened it, so painful husky speech was possible. “You waste your life in revenge,” she whispered.

Her answer did not please Ranulf. He took another long drink. “The ship is bound for France,” he repeated unnecessarily. “Do you speak French, whore?”

When Gillian shook her head, he smiled again. “Of course, the destination should be of no concern to you. You will never reach the port. I shall simply pay my friend to drop you over the side in midchannel. Actually, that way is cheaper. He has not the problem of disposal once you arrive. You will disappear from the face of the earth. Good riddance to all of your sex I say.”

“Here, now!” Wat’s voice sounded dimly in her ear. “She’s sliding off again.”

“Revive her,” Ranulf commanded. “I want to watch her terror.”

But she could not feel the blows. Her hands were numb. Only the sound of roaring filled her ears. Was she already at sea? She was slipping, floating down, down, down into blackness so deep that she could never climb back out. Briefly she thought of Kenneth, of Tobin, of

Brian, but only in flashes like pictures. They did not speak, nor move. Like lights they blinked on, then off in her brain before she knew no more.

"Shall I take her now, milord?" Wat asked. "Likely, she'll not regain her senses for hours." He tilted the face upward by placing his hand under the chin. "She looks half dead already."

Ranulf shuddered at the fair youthful face, now bruised and beginning to swell. Disappointed and enraged, he felt the deep dissatisfaction that his own ungratified lust had created. "Leave her be," he commanded, moving to pour a mug of ale for himself and another for Wat. "She will keep for the minute." His hand closed over the shoulder of his henchman. "Come," he smiled invitingly, rubbing his fingers into the lean muscles. "We have many hours before the ship sails."



## Chapter Nineteen

The wind snapped the sails viciously under the gray glowering sky as the small heavily loaded merchant vessel wallowed her way creakily from the mouth of the Thames toward the open sea. Low in the water from the weight of her cargo, she constantly blew her horn at approaching small craft that scudded back and forth across her path.

Truth to tell, her bottom was befouled. Old, long overdue for a drydocking, she was nevertheless called upon to make the voyage in and out of small bays and inlets between the mouth of the Thames and the Isle of Thanet, south to Dover and across the straits to Calais. She was an English vessel, *The Maudelayne*, sailing only to English ports but carrying whatever trade goods she was paid to, with no questions asked.

Consequently, the hold into which Wat's burden had

been unceremoniously dropped was redolent of many past voyages, some bearing cargo in deplorable condition. The smells of vinegary wine and rancid fat, of dead rats and bilge, assaulted Gillian's nostrils, forcing her at last into a state of semiconsciousness.

Immediately, her stomach heaved violently, but she had nothing to expel. Finally, the spasms abated, and she rolled over onto her back staring wretchedly upward. Through the grating over the hold, she could see only dull gray sky. Around her was utter darkness alive with creaking, groaning sounds and disgusting odors.

Gradually, the sounds began to separate themselves. The primary sound all around her was the slap of water. She was on a ship! They had done it. She was on her way out into the ocean. She would be dropped overboard, drowned like an unwanted kitten. A tear slid down from the corner of her eye.

In abject misery she lay in the foul damp hold, staring through the grating far above her head. A gull flapped across the tiny patches of sky. Free! It was free. She closed her eyes, giving herself up to self-pity and weakness. Her whole body, especially her arms and hands, hurt in varying degrees. Her parched, bruised lips moved experimentally. A low whimpering sound escaped her as her dry swollen tongue rasped across her lips. She hurt so badly she wanted to die.

In the darkness beyond her head she heard a loud squeaking and scuffling. A rat! Oh! A rat! She hated rats. Galvanized into action by thoughts of the furry, slick-tailed creatures with sharp teeth and nasty claws, she lunged upright. Dizzily she reeled from side to side in the hold, rebounding off crates and bales. The motion of the ship set her staggering drunkenly, but by some miracle

she managed to keep her legs under her.

When her body finally came to rest, wedged in a corner formed by two crates, the skylight seemed much nearer than it had before. After all, she thought hopefully, she might see a way out of here. If she could just manage to get her hands free . . . Experimentally, she moved her fingers. To her surprise she found that she could still do so, although they felt like sticks of wood, without tips.

A sharp metal edge on one of these crates might serve as a knife, if she could only find such a thing. Sometimes the metal hoops of barrels had upper edges sticking out. Carefully feeling with her palms, she brushed her way around the surfaces against which she leaned.

No luck there. All were wooden and bound with ropes. The sharp point of a nail scratched her, but on investigation it proved to be only a bare quarter of an inch long, unsuitable for her purpose.

Ah, barrels. Bracing herself, she lunged in their direction as the ship rocked and pitched under her. Twice she measured her steps backward as the deck beneath her feet rose. The sky through the grating was fast turning from gray to purplish black. Thunder rumbled far off.

Despite her feverish desire to find a means to free herself, Gillian could not forbear glancing at the sky. If the storm broke before she could get her hands free, she might be tossed about so badly that she would be unable to stand. Her present condition, already considerably weakened by hunger, might become so much worse that a long storm would render her helpless.

Frantically, her palms slid over the barrels. At last, she found what she sought—a sharp edge bent outward and split from rough handling. The jagged edge of the split was perfect for her purpose.

Fumbling and cursing inwardly, she finally maneuvered her hands into the proper position. Body bent at an odd angle, her feet braced against the pitching deck, she doubted her strength within less than a minute. She could not. . . . But what had she to lose. If she succeeded, she might get free and hide herself until the ship reached France. If she did not succeed, she would be here when they came for her. Might as well expend her energy in the struggle for freedom as lie like a helpless rat in a trap.

A rat! The thought gave her precious seconds of vitality. When she finally had to pause, she was shaking with weakness. The ropes felt infinitely tighter from the strain she was putting on them.

Above her the thunder rolled. A voice bawled orders. She could hear the sound of running feet overhead. Rain began to fall, spattering through the grating and beginning to flood the hold. As the ship pitched, the water began to slosh backward and forward. Already her boots were wet. Thank heaven, she was not still lying where she had been thrown under the grate. She would be wet and cold already. Here only a fine spray touched her.

Revived by the thought that she had something to be grateful for, she continued her efforts. She was beginning to get a rhythm going. The ship swayed beneath her; thunder crashed. Lightning flashes illuminated the hold time and again. Violent bouts of seasickness swept over her causing her stomach to heave, but she could bring nothing up. Cold, salt spray constantly spattering her face kept her conscious.

The ropes were parting. She could feel the frayed ends snapping back against her wrists. With all the strength of

her shoulders and arms, she tugged at the ends. Still not enough. Sobbing with frustration, she continued rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. Her arms threatened to drop from their sockets. Her wrists and hands felt as if she had thrust them into fire.

At last, the rope split. Only a few stretched strands held it. With a weak pull, she managed to part it completely.

Her arms felt wrenched as she gingerly brought them in front of her and held her hands in front of her. In the grayness, she could not see clearly. Perhaps it was better not to see them; the sight would likely depress her. Closing her eyes, she slid down the barrel onto the damp floor. Better sit than fall, she thought. Drawing a deep breath, she lifted her right hand to her mouth and began to gnaw at the knot with her teeth.

When at last the rope came free of her right hand, she could not control the sobs of pain. The blood flowing back into that abused extremity burned like acid and oozed from the wounds in her wrist. Thousands of tiny pinpricks of returning life tormented her so that she beat her hand against her thigh in a futile effort to gain some slight relief.

She cast her eyes upward toward the squares of grayish purple sky. Teeth clenched against the pain, she realized that she could not bear to free her left wrist. So intense was her present agony that more would make her faint. Shutting the pain into one area of her mind, she stared round her, studying her surroundings with desperate intensity.

A short wooden ladder led upward to one side of the hatch opening. Although the grate appeared to fit tightly, she might be able to slide it aside and sneak out. Watch-

ing overhead for some sign that she was observed, she cautiously mounted the ladder.

A bolt of lightning bright enough to illuminate the entire hold blinded Gillian's upturned eyes. Thunder exploded in a deafening clap directly overhead. As if from a gigantic bucket, water poured down through the squares in the grate. She was drenched to the skin with icy water, but she welcomed its cleansing touch. She was sure her wounded wrists would never heal without scars, but at least they would stand a better chance of not becoming infected.

Her head butted against the grate. Dare she raise it? From somewhere in back of her, she could hear commands bawled in a hoarse voice.

She had no idea how long she had lain unconscious. Was it most of the day? When had she been dumped into the hold? Certainly, the cover of the storm with its darkness and alarm seemed a heaven-sent opportunity to escape. Water poured in through the openings. Cautiously, she pushed upward.

At first the grate did not budge. Gritting her teeth, she pushed again, this time hunching her shoulder against it. It rose a few inches. Grimly, she waited, her thighs trembling under the weight. If someone noticed . . . No cry of alarm reached her above the howling wind and roaring water.

Gathering her strength, she stepped up on the next rung of the ladder. Bowing her back, she pressed upward using the strength of her legs. A crack appeared between the heavy grate and the edge of the hold.

Salty spray stung her eyes. Before her was little more than open sea. Only a few feet of deck and a wooden railing separated her from rolling, churning water. Even

as she stared, aghast, a great wave crashed over the side, driving the water through the opening and into her mouth and eyes. Coughing, sputtering, half-blinded, she nevertheless held her position and even managed to raise the cover another few inches.

The sky was dark purple, illuminated occasionally by brilliant flashes of forked lightning. The ocean was an ugly gray, almost black, with white foam on the crest of each gigantic wave.

Only her desire to escape the hold, fortified by the knowledge that she would be drowned at the first opportunity, gave her the strength to conquer her terror. How she longed to pull back into the hold and cower down! She had never even been out in a boat before. She could not swim. Her feet had always been planted firmly on dry land.

She raised the cover another few inches. With surprising ease she had created enough space to crawl out of the hold. Like an eel she slipped her leg over the edge and felt for the deck with her toe. In one quick motion, she pulled herself through the opening and slid prone onto the heaving boards. The hatch cover thudded down behind her.

For a moment, she could only lie flat with her face pressed into her hands to shield herself from the storm's fury. The wind slammed against her with such force that she doubted her ability to stand upright. How did anyone manage such a feat on a heaving slippery deck? Salt water stung her eyes. Soaked to the skin and shivering uncontrollably, Gillian realized she must move.

Pressing her hands flat, she took a deep breath. At that moment a hand dropped onto her shoulder.

"Up wi' ye, lad. Hang onto the rail like I told ye. Never

come away from it. 'Tis safest closest to the sea." The strong hard hand hauled her up and dragged her to the railing. The hoarse voice continued instructing her to hang on and move hand over hand.

Midst the darkness and the slashing rain, he must be mistaking her for one of the crew. Gratefully, she obeyed his instructions and followed where he led. She would watch carefully for an opportunity to duck away and hide when they got in out of the driving rain.

Gillian did not dare to raise her face to stare around her at the vessel on which she rode. Keeping her head well down and her eyes glued to the legs of the man she followed, she did not see the chaos around her. The *Maudelayne* wallowed from side to side almost as much as she heaved up and down. Like a fat old crone, she waddled through the waves that rose in peaks above her bow and washed over her decks.

The door to a companionway opened and steps led down toward a dim light. Fearfully she paused. If she followed her guide into the light, he would recognize her or, as the case was, not recognize her. Frozen on the top step, she tried to survey her surroundings in the darkness, searching vainly for a hole to hide in, a door to slip through, an escape of any kind.

But even as the man ducked into the light at the bottom of the steps, she was knocked forward and down by the sudden opening of the door behind her. Another man had burst in through it.

"Sorry," came the gruff voice behind her as she staggered down the steps and into the light. "Did not mean to give you such a swat, but 'tis wretched cold and wet out there, as you might have seen." The sailor came down the steps two at a time. "Give us a warm drink, Cookie,"



he called.

The instant Gillian had staggered into the lighted room, she had thrown herself to one side. Pressing herself against the wall like a cornered animal, she stared fearfully around her waiting for the outcry that she knew must come. Her hands clenched into fists. She was not very good as a fighter, but she silently vowed she would not allow them to throw her overboard like a sack of meal. She would resist.

Gradually, she realized that the five or six other occupants of the cabin were not paying the slightest bit of attention to her. Two sat slumped over a heavy oaken table, their hands laced around thick mugs of steaming drink. The one who had guided her into this cabin did not glance in her direction before he, too, slumped down tiredly at the head of the table, at right angles to the others.

The one who had catapulted her into the room followed him, threw his leg over the bench, and called again for the cook who ambled forward with two more mugs of the steaming brew.

"Your watch," her guide informed the two who had been in the room when he entered.

"Aye, Skipper." The two rose almost simultaneously. Regretfully, one drained the contents of the mug while the other fastened his clothing more securely around him.

"Any signs that we might run out of it?"

The man addressed as Skipper shook his head, burying his face in the mug, before answering. After a long swallow he wiped his heavy gray beard with the back of a gnarled hand. "Not likely. We will be on the French coast before we know it."

"Oh, aye," came the snorted reply. "Or the Danish."

The skipper did not comment further, but signaled to the cook for more steaming brew. The two lumbered up the steps and out into the howling night, a blast of noise through the open door signaling their exit.

When the cook brought the skipper's drink, he also brought another mug which he thrust into Gillian's frozen hand as he passed her. With a silent nod, he indicated a place at the table.

Suddenly, her physical condition reasserted itself. She had been distracted by the sea and the storm. The elements combined with the imminence of discovery had forced her multiple pains from her mind.

Now she clutched the steaming mug as if it contained the elixir of life. Lifting it to her lips with shaking hands, she almost choked on the hot wine. The liquid burned her tongue and her throat as it warmed her all the way to her stomach. Like lava the warming brew sped along her veins to every part of her numbed abused body.

She shuddered at the taste, but immediately drank again, gratefully gulping it down. At any minute her identity would be discovered. This might be her last drink on earth. At least it was a warming one.

"Sit ye down, lad."

Senses instantly alert, she stared over the rim of the mug at the skipper, who sat unconcernedly at the head of the table. Could he be talking to her, ordering her to sit at the table with him? The minute she stepped into the light spilled from the swaying lantern hung above the center of the table, he would know she was not the person he thought her to be.

Trying to think what to do, she hesitated, the now empty mug held before her face like a mask.

"I thought you were a goner for sure," the other man joined in the conversation. "Thought you went over the side when that big wave hit us. I looked one minute and you were there by the rail and then the wave hit."

Cautiously, not daring to hope, Gillian lowered the mug. Neither man appeared in any way suspicious. Wondering if she were in a nightmare, she raised one trembling hand to her face. The bruises on it felt puffy.

"Uh . . ." she began, then paused and cleared her throat gruffly. "Uh . . . I fell down. Banged my face up pretty bad on the deck."

"Too bad," the skipper sympathized mildly. "'Twill take ye a day or two to get your sealegs, lubber that ye are."

A tingle of hope danced along Gillian's nerves. "Yes . . . uh . . . aye, sir. I guess so."

"Come on and sit down. Serve us some of that stew, Cookie."

"Aye, Skipper." Heavy plates, a matched set with the mugs, were placed in front of the two men. "Come on, lad, sit you down." The cook set a plate down in the spot vacated by one of the two who had gone above.

Maybe if she kept her head bowed . . . Gillian thought. She could not just stand here forever. The ship heaved as thunder rolled above decks. The motion added impetus to her cautious step, staggering her into the table which she caught with both hands. The same movement set the lantern swinging wildly. More to keep herself from falling than anything else, she sank onto the bench where the plate had been set for her.

The cook went around filling plates with a white stew made of fish, barley, and onions. Its savory smell rose around her, making her nostrils twitch and her stomach

growl. The skipper and the crewmen paid no attention to her. They had accepted her presence as a member of the crew. Perhaps in broad daylight, they might recognize her, but tonight in the semidarkness with the lantern swinging wildly, she was not scrutinized.

Besides who else could she be? Not some vagabond off the streets.

Drawing a shivery breath, she set to work on the stew, swiping the liquid up with a crust of bread and spearing the pieces of fish with a knife. Her chill body began to warm. The cook poured her more hot wine. Despite the danger, she began to relax. Her head began to nod.

"Turn in, lad," the skipper ordered. "'Tis been a rough beginning for a life at sea."

Helplessly, she stared at her clean plate. Now would come the discovery.

"Come." The other man rose from the table and motioned. "This way. You can use this hammock." He led her through a door behind the galley to a larger room strung with hammocks and warmed by a potbellied stove with coals of fire glowing warmly through its grate.

Shivering in her soaked clothing, she held her hands toward its warmth.

"Get out of those wet things," the other man advised, as he shed his boots and oilskin coat.

Again Gillian tensed. She had nothing to put on. If she should be so stupid as to undress in front of these men, such a move would mean instant recognition, probably accompanied by her shameful rape, before they threw her body overboard. She shook her head dizzily, almost overwhelmed by her exhaustion and the drink. She could not think. She must make some excuse.

"There be your gear," the man pointed to a bundle on

the floor under the hammock. "Change into your dry things, before the bloody cold gets into your lungs."

So saying, he swung himself into his own hammock, wrapped the bedding around him and fell almost instantly to sleep, even as Gillian stared at him.

With a now-or-never feeling, she slipped to her knees on the floor beside the gray bundle. Untying it, she found rough but heavy and serviceable shirts and trousers that would buckle below her knees with hose to cover her feet and legs.

Almost before one might blink an eye, she had stripped off her sodden shirt and replaced it with the rough full one. It fitted her well enough, being sufficiently long in the arms and body to more than adequately conceal her femininity. Stripping off her chausses, she donned the rest of the clothing thankfully. At last she was dry.

Kneeling in a welter of wet garments, she looked around her. There was no escape from the room except through the galley. And then where would she go? Great weakness and dizziness overcame her. She had to rest.

Clumsily she climbed into the hammock and pulled the damp musty covers around her. Wrapped in the smelly cocoon, she swung back and forth as the ship rode the waves. Terror and pain faded away. Like a dead man, she slept.

## *Chapter Twenty*

"Your watch, laddie!" The hoarse voice growling so close to her ear barely stirred Gillian, so deep in exhausted slumber did she lie.

With a faint groan she sought to move her arms, to stretch them above her head. The cocoon of bedding in the hammock bound her so tightly that she could free only her fingertips, wriggling them out of the mass experimentally.

The hammock swayed as violently as ever, testimony to the storm's continuing fury if the thunder's sullen rumble were not enough.

"Come on, laddie," the weary voice commanded irritably. "Your turn. I be dead on m' feet."

"Yes, sir." Gillian worked her whole hand free and began to pull the musty woolen blankets down from around her ears. Without another comment the man

turned away, shedding his wet outer garments in a sodden pile before climbing into his hammock. Actually fighting the bedroll then, as if it were about to strangle her, the girl at last got a foot free and swept her arms and legs outward. The hammock promptly pitched violently, then flipped over dropping her onto the cold wet floor with a painful thump.

On hands and knees, she looked around her quickly, embarrassed by her clumsiness and afraid of discovery. The figure in the hammock was already asleep. As the ship rolled, the sounds of the roaring, foaming sea filled her ears until she thought the whole world must be dissolving in chaos.

"Watch," he had said. She must find her shoes somewhere on the wet floor in the near darkness. Cautiously, she began to feel around, her fingers trailing through tiny salty slips of water on the uneven floor. At last, she located one, then the other, and dragged them over her feet. It was like putting on sodden leather rags. She began to shiver immediately.

The door from the galley opened, framing the cook's rotund body and the skinny legs hanging out from beneath his apron. "The skipper bade us let you sleep," he informed her in a friendly manner, "but he needs you topside now. Come eat a bite and drink another mug of wine to warm your innards."

At the mention of more food and drink, Gillian scrambled to her feet, catching at the hammock rope as the deck lurched crazily beneath her feet.

"Aye," the cook advised her. "Hold on tight. We be running before the storm. But the old *Maudelayne's* a good stout lady. She may be a bit creaky here and there, but she can weather with the best."

Privately, now that she had begun to recover her interest in staying alive, Gillian doubted that any man-made object could weather such chaotic elements as the North Sea storms. Even as she reached the table, the ship seemed to stand on the crest of a tall wave, teeter backward and forward for heartstopping seconds, then plunge downward almost perpendicularly. Its action flung her into the side of the table, bruising her hip. Hanging onto the massive oak with one hand, she rubbed her injury with the other and stared in amazement at the cook, who seemed to be anchored by lead soles on his shoes. With each motion of the ship, he swayed with practiced rhythm in the opposite direction.

"How can you stay upright?" she gawked.

He shrugged, moving with a weaving gait around the end of the table to fetch her a piece of bread and more of the hot wine from last night. "Not too much to drink now," he cautioned. "Just a bit to warm ye. Then down the bread and off ye go. Ye don't want to be drunk. To be drunk in this sea is dangerous. Just warmth for a few minutes until yer body gets used to the bite of the air."

"What do I do?"

"Report to the skipper. He be the one to assign ye to the watch."

Still keeping her head down, her face concealed by the shadows or the cup from which she drank, Gillian hesitated. "Where are we?"

The cook shrugged. "Hard to say at this point. Somewhere in the middle of the sea near the coast of France." His lack of interest amazed Gillian at the same time that it reassured her. This man had no fear of the elements. Or perhaps he simply had no special interest in them.

The roar of the storm now intruded on her conscious-



ness, which had been selecting his voice and obscuring all else. A cowardly shivering began at her spine and transmitted itself to her feet, her hands, her stomach. Her teeth began to chatter violently, clacking against the rim of the mug. Wrapping both hands around it, she lowered it to the table.

The cook shot her a tolerant glance. "Best be going," he advised. "We be in the heart of the storm. Not much chance of a letup."

Her hands released the cup, shifted to the edge of the table, and pushed her upright. Her only chance was to do the job they thought her hired for.

"Take one of those oilskin capes." The cook pointed to a heavy gray garment hanging on a peg by the outer door.

With only a moment's struggle, she donned it, tying the ends of an oiled hood around her head and low on her forehead. She was ready.

The wind struck her like a gigantic hand almost throwing her back down the companionway. How could anyone even stand in this, much less make a way through it . . . or stand watch in it? She stared around her through slitted eyes trying to locate the skipper. Seeing nothing before her but rolling sea, she staggered along the wall of the cabin to a small ladder that led to the upper deck. Cautiously, she mounted it.

The full fury of the storm struck her in the face as her head came over the top of the deck. Heavy salt spray filled her eyes with tears. When she gasped, the air was so water laden that she wondered if it would drown her.

A sort of low canvas tent had been erected on the deck. To this she made her way and stumbled in. Two men crouched inside, their faces drawn. One did not even

glance in her direction. The other, the one she recognized as the skipper, nodded grimly. "Took ye long enough, lad."

"Sorry, sir."

"Ye need to do better. Other men have stood their watches and are depending on ye to relieve them so they can go below."

Nervously, Gillian glanced in the direction of the other man who nodded to the skipper before he crawled out of the small tent. The wind filled its canvas sides whooshing them out, threatening to carry the frail structure away into the darkness and the storm.

The skipper handed her a spyglass, drawing it out to its length and closing it back again. "Now, lad, keep watch. Time and again ye keep this trained outside through the holes toward the horizon. If ye spot anything, anything at all, ye pull this cord. Pull it hard, lad, and keep pulling it until I get up here. Do ye understand?"

Gillian nodded, keeping her head down and her shoulders hunched.

The skipper stared at her closely. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Ye gave your face a bad bashing," he remarked at last. His gnarled hand reached out to take her chin between thumb and index finger and turn it up to face him in the semidarkness.

She stiffened, ready to fight for her life. With a full belly and a night's sleep, her spirit had rejuvenated. But he merely turned her head from side to side as he studied her bruises.

At last he let go of her chin. "Ye look somewhat younger than I thought at first. Hardly a sign of a beard."

"'Twill make no difference," she assured him huskily. "I can do my work."

"Oh, I doubt not, lad." His chuckle was the only dry thing about the wretched day. As he pulled himself through the opening in the tent, a blast of storm-breath threatened to take the canvas again.

Bravely, she turned the spyglass to the hole just in front of her. This was a real exercise in futility she thought. She could see nothing. Not even the horizon. The deep purplish gray of the stormy sky was reflected in the water. The waves rose higher than the ship in all directions. Thunder rumbled periodically.

Miserably cold and wet, Gillian stood her watch. The hot wine she had drunk was only a sweet memory. Her teeth chattered, and her chilled fingers ached from gripping the spyglass and holding it horizontally from her eye.

After an hour she cradled the instrument across her lap and bared her left wrist. The rope with which she had been bound was still knotted tightly around it. The ends dangled free when she pushed back her sleeve. With shivering fingers she plucked at the knot. Her hand was too weak. Raising her wrist to her mouth, she gnawed at the offensive thing. It was hard and cold and very salty. Furthermore, the soaked knot was rocklike. At first she could make no progress.

Resting, she pulled the spyglass up to her eye and made a circuit of the horizon. The sky seemed to be lightening slightly behind them. Perhaps the storm was passing them.

Cradling the glass again, she continued gnawing at the rope. As she sat, she tried not to think of her predicament. Suppose the skipper had figured out who she was. Would he merely wait until the storm abated to drop her over the side? Her stomach lurched as a tremor of fear

ran through her. She had not thought about being seasick in a long time. Perhaps she was not going to be seasick any longer. Thank God for small favors. At least she could die on a quiet stomach.

Suddenly, the knot began to pull apart. She could scarcely believe she was actually succeeding in freeing herself. When she could have grasped the rope with her fingers, she bit down on it and tugged backward like a hound. Ruefully, she chuckled to herself. "Good dog," she whispered as she lowered her wrist and pulled the knot apart with ease.

As the rope fell away, a peculiar sensation gripped her. As if it were a symbol of bondage, it had weighted her with more than intrinsic weight. Her left hand tingled to its fingertips, torturing her with the sweetness of the pain. Gasping, she allowed her head to roll back as with eyes closed she accepted the agony of returning life. Before she was aware, soft tears squeezed from the corners of her lids and trickled down her cheeks.

For a full minute she massaged her wrist. At last she straightened her body to look at her hand. The rope lay in her lap, like a dark serpent coiled obscenely across her calf. In a wash of anger, she caught it up. Despite the howling storm, she crawled from beneath the tent. Standing erect in the whipping rain, she hurled the rope into the wind. With a shudder of satisfaction, she watched as the gale carried it, writhing away, into the darkness.

Taking advantage of her freedom despite the chill, she scanned the horizon in every direction. Still nothing. The *Maudelayne* creaked and groaned like a soul in torment but seemed to be weathering the storm well.

Breathing easier than she had since Ranulf had

captured her, Gillian slipped back inside the tent and resumed her watch. Perhaps by the time the storm was over, the skipper and the rest of the crew would have accepted her so they would not even question her identity. At the first port she would slip away and find passage back to England. The business of hiding her sex from the crew did not daunt her. She was familiar with all the tricks of concealment.

Gradually, she began to relax. Her only problem became staying awake. Because of the sameness of the weather, she had no clear impression of day or night. Likewise, she had no idea how many hours had passed since she had been captured by Ranulf.

He had taken her prisoner just at dusk. The hour had been late when he had discovered her identity and knocked her unconscious. The time that had elapsed until she regained consciousness in the hold of the *Maudelayne*, and the hours she had slept before being awakened for her watch were the unknown factors.

In the middle of the ocean, she had no idea in which direction the ship was being borne. As these thoughts flitted through her mind, she became further aware of her isolation. She was alone in the middle of a stormy sea with not one friend around her. If not surrounded by enemies, she was amidst men who would probably kill her without compunction.

The sky behind them became lighter and lighter. Either the storm was blowing itself out or was outdistancing them. The rain began to slacken its fierce pelting. Yawning widely, Gillian opened the tent flap and peered out. The motion of the ship settled to a more gentle rocking. Although the waves were still high, they seemed farther apart.

As she stared out, the rain stopped entirely. The sky overhead lightened to a pale gray with a tinge of blue. Tentatively, she sniffed the air finding it clean and fresh with only a hint of saltiness.

Behind her in the direction the ship had sailed, she could hear the roaring still. The storm was definitely passing on. She wondered idly when she would be relieved of her watch. She was sleepy and hungry too. A hot plate of fish stew with a crust of hard bread to scoop it up with would go well right now. She was hungry enough to eat anything.

A door opened on the deck beneath her. The skipper stepped out and strolled toward the bow of the ship. His distinctive rolling gait identified him, as did the fierce grizzled whiskers that tangled around the sides of his cheeks and stuck out in gray tufts on either side of his head.

Immediately, Gillian ducked back inside her tent, closing the flap except for a slit through which she could peek. As she watched, the old man knelt on the grate over the hold in which she had been imprisoned. Cupping his hands around his face to accustom his eyes to the dark interior, he peered down intently. He was looking for her, Gillian realized instantly. A cold chill spread from her belly to her heart, stopping her breath in her throat.

The skipper glanced keenly in her direction, seemed satisfied, then stepped down off the hatch and slid the cover aside. As Gillian watched with clenched fists held against her mouth, he disappeared into the hold.

Frantically, Gillian waited. When he discovered his victim was missing, what would be his reaction? Would he immediately connect the unfamiliar face of the new deckhand with her, or would he not make the connection

at all? Trembling, she waited for what seemed hours.

In her mind she could see him searching in the dimness, confidently at first, then with progressive irritation as his prey seemed to have hidden herself well. Finally, he would become angry, tossing barrels aside with his rough gnarled hands as he cursed under his breath.

How long would he continue the futile search? The answer was not long in coming. His head appeared above the hold. On deck again, he scratched his beard in a puzzled fashion. Hands on hips he stared around him at the expanse of calming sea in the wake of the *Maude-layne*. The man's entire aspect bespoke perplexity. Where was she?

His thick grizzled brows beetled together as he frowned at the tossing waves. Suddenly he stiffened. Watching from the slit in the tent flap, Gillian recognized the change in his aspect.

His shoulders hunched as if anticipating a knifethrust. Slowly he turned. His hands dropped to his sides where they clenched into tight fists. His eyes narrowed against the lightening day. As if the canvas were not around her, he stared at her. In the minute of recognition the two regarded each other as if each was stripped bare.

She saw his lips move in the tangle of his beard. Then he started forward, his rolling gait carrying him across the deck and up the ladder with frightening swiftness. Shoulders hunched and teeth clenched, she waited for his hand to grasp the tent flap. But he never swept it aside.

Instead, the alarm bell began a fearful clamor. The line with its wooden peg attached to the end jumped and twisted within the confines of the tent. Dazedly, she

stared at it, its meaning eluding her. Was he calling the others to help him drag one lone girl from beneath a frail piece of canvas? Would he require the help of the entire crew to consign her to the depths?

Suddenly, jarringly, the *Maudelayne* jolted against something in her downward pitch. Through the canvas she heard the skipper curse loudly and fervently. The cries of the crew were added to his noise. The vessel slewed violently sideways.

Gillian was slung against the side of the tent with such force that the canvas ripped loose from its moorings. At the same time the skipper crashed through the top, his body tangling in the welter of canvas and lines. Scrambling to her hands and knees, Gillian shook her head in disbelief.

A sandy expanse of beach stretched before her almost under the bow of the ship. They had run aground. Watching the skipper, she had neglected her duty. The wind-driven vessel had rammed head-on into the sand bar that guarded the beach.

Gillian glanced over her shoulder at the struggling skipper, who continued to spit forth a string of oaths, the meaning of which she could only guess at. He had managed to flop his body over on his belly, at the same time tangling himself more hopelessly in the whipping lines and ripped swathes of wet canvas. The face he turned toward his sometime deckhand glowed bright red. His mouth contorted into a mask of hatred while his eyes promised murder. The tangled grizzled beard shook wildly as he screamed imprecations at her.

Her decision was made. Springing to her feet, she avoided the gnarled hands clutching at her and dashed to the bow of the vessel. Only a moment she stared down



into the churning, boiling surf. How deep it was, she had no idea. It was her only hope. The skipper would do worse than drown her if he caught her.

*"Stop him! Blast your eyes. A gold piece to the man who catches that . . ."*

She never heard what he called her. Taking a deep breath, her eyes concentrating hopefully on the sandy beach that glimmered like silver in the strengthening light, she leaped out as far as she could beyond the grinding bow. Icy water closed over her head, causing her to gasp for breath and at the same time swallow some of the unfamiliar salty liquid.

Down she slid into the churning water. Her eyes stung like fire, but she refused to shut them. She could bear the pain. She must see where she was going. Desperately she kicked with her legs and flailed with her arms.

She was sinking. She could not keep afloat. Through blurred eyes she glimpsed the shoreline. So close. She took a deep breath as the waves closed over her again.

Miraculously, her feet touched the sandy bottom. The distance from the top of her head to the surface could be no more than a couple of feet. Pushing downward with her hands and jumping, she drove herself forward and upward. Her progress was agonizingly slow, but each time she could take a breath before she sank again. Her terror subsided slightly.

Fortunately, the waves slapped at her back as she came to the surface. Their power carried her forward. Now she could touch bottom with her toes while her head was out of the water. Then her shoulders.

In her ears she could hear more and more faintly the shouts of the crew, but she dared not look around. The pounding surf, the whirling white water around her waist

now, seemed almost warm as she exerted herself to the utmost. Her clothing dragged her down. She was getting winded, but the beach was ahead of her. She was almost to dry land.

Risking a glance over her shoulder, she saw that the attention of the men of the *Maudelayne* had turned from her. The skipper had turned his back to the beach and stood gesticulating wildly. His crew scurried to and fro, their full attention centered on obeying his commands and getting the vessel afloat again.

Her spirits rose at the same time her breath rasped in her throat in great agonizing gasps. The salty water that she had swallowed burned like fire. But she was moving. The water was swirling around her thighs. Then her knees. Throwing herself forward, she began to run, splashing the white water in all directions.

In water only an inch deep, she fell, gasping, panting, her eyes and throat burning. The last few feet she accomplished on hands and knees. The tears began to come then. Great gulping sobs of thanksgiving tore from her. She would not drown. She was free from the old barge with its menacing piratical skipper. She had escaped the horrible death Ranulf had planned for her.

Only a moment did she allow herself to lie on the cold damp sand. Rolling over on her back, she hoisted herself on her elbows to watch the efforts of the crew to get the ship afloat. Not a jot of remorse stirred within her. They had callously taken the job of murdering her. She hoped their rotten old ship stayed on the sand forever.

The sea wind plastered her wet clothing against her body. Her teeth started to chatter. Hurriedly, she pulled herself to her feet and surveyed the shoreline. A discernible path wound away into the dunes. At the end

of the path hopefully were people with whom she could shelter until she could arrange for passage back to England. Clenching her teeth to still their chattering, she loped away from the rolling sea.

At the crest of the dune, she turned and looked back. They were still working futilely. A brief smile curved her face as she raised her hand to thumb her nose in their direction.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

Still yoked to the empty wagon, the white oxen stood disconsolately in the courtyard of the Tabard Inn. Rain pelted their soaked hides and formed muddy pools around their hocks. Finally, one drew in a deep breath and gave forth with a mournful bawl.

A sleepy ostler peered out, gesturing obscenely from the window. A flash of lightning, followed immediately by a deafening clap of thunder, set the second ox to bawling. Within the inn itself Harry Bailey rose sighing. The quality of help he was able to hire these days left much to be desired. Perhaps he was really getting too old for innkeeping.

Yawning and shaking his head at the thunder, he began to dress. Again a loud bawl drew him to his dormer window overlooking the courtyard and the brilliantly painted sign. The oxen looked familiar somehow. Sud-

denly, the identity of their owner dawned upon him.

Hastening from his room, he knocked on the door of the suite where his friends had spent the night. "Howard! Hob! Awake! Brian de Trenanay! Sirs! Awake!"

His pounding brought the squire almost immediately. Dressed only in his hose and shoes, and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Hob regarded Harry sourly. "By God, Harry, it cannot be time to pay the reckoning this early. You used to allow the guests at least time for breakfast before rousting them out."

Harry looked hurt. "Your friend Gil Fletcher's oxen and wagon have returned without him," he announced.

Hob's forehead wrinkled. Shaking his head worriedly, he drew a deep breath. "Best wake up Sir Brian. He paced the floor until the wee hours worrying about the boy. Seems he was right to fear."

Harry nodded glumly. "The young one must have met with foul play."

Entering the bedchamber, Hob roused Brian with only a touch.

"Gil . . ." The knight's eyes flew open. At the sight of the squire bending over him, he tightened his jaw. Wide-awake, he sat straight up searching the room beyond where he caught sight of Harry standing stolidly in the doorway, his hands clasped over his apron. "Has Gil returned—"

The older man shook his head. "The team is standing in the courtyard bawling, but of the boy there is no sign."

Icy fear gripped Brian in the pit of his stomach. Cursing vividly, he flung back the covers and swung his muscular legs over the side of the bed. "No sign of him, you say?"

The squire shook his head stepping back as Brian

began to draw on his clothing with frantic haste.

"That fool boy."

Hob nodded sadly. "He had his commission to deliver. We were drunken. But he should not have left without an escort."

Brian drew on his boots. "What does the wagon look like?"

"I have not looked at it. I thought to rouse you immediately."

Brian nodded. "Right. Put on your tunic and follow me down straightway." He regarded the shoulders and chest of the man he had challenged to fight to the death. Although of slighter build than Brian's, Hob's shoulders were strongly muscled. His chest likewise was well developed for his size. A sprinkling of gray hairs among the blond ones did not deceive Brian into believing that the contest would have been an easy victory for himself.

As Hob hurried into his own room, Brian confronted Harry Bailey. "Has anyone investigated the wagon?"

Harry turned to lead the way. "Come, my lord, we will go down together now that you have covered yourself."

Brian mounted to the wagon seat, the rain slashing at his face, plastering his fair hair to his forehead. The wagon was empty. To assure himself, he climbed into the bed and knelt behind the seat. Only the neatly folded canvas that had been used to cover the load lay carefully tucked underneath. A black tip of cloth peeped from behind it. Pouncing on it, he drew it forth.

Emotional pain pierced him so that, desperate, he clutched at his wound in sympathy. The crumpled cloth was her hat. Her black hat with its red and gold insignia. He crushed it in his hand as he rested his forehead against the rough boards before him. She must have been

snatched from this very seat.

Sitting back on his heels, he started to examine his find when Harry Bailey called to him. "Come in out of the driving rain, Sir Brian. You will catch the lung fever and be to bury. 'Twill do Master Gil no good at all."

Recognizing the truth of the innkeeper's admonition, Brian vaulted over the side of the wagon. Harry signaled to the ostler to lead the cattle into the stable and care for them. In the taproom, Hob thrust a tankard of ale into Brian's hand. "What did you find?"

"Her hat . . ." Brian held it out.

"*Her!*" Both men stared aghast at Brian's words.

Brian shook his head, turning the piece of velvet cloth over and over in his hands. "I did not mean to tell. Forgive me, Gillian," he muttered.

"You mean Gil Fletcher . . . *Master Gil Fletcher* . . . is a girl!" Hob's voice stammered in surprise.

"She poses as her own twin brother to retain the family seat in the guildhall," Brian explained, his fingers moving ceaselessly over the soft velvet. "My God!" he gasped, his voice trembling.

"What have you found, my lord?"

"A crusted stain, Hob. Unless I am wrong . . . and I have seen too many on velvets . . . this hat has a blood-stain in the band." The eyes that the knight raised to his sometime squire were dark with pain.

Hob reached out for the hat, bending Brian's icy fingers away from the crushed velvet. "It could be anything." His own voice was hoarse. He had liked and admired the young man Gil Fletcher. Now his tender heart, trained in the ideals of courtly love, went out to the imagined suffering of a gentle damsel.

Harry Bailey cleared his throat. "Sit you down, gentle-

men," he ordered, taking Brian's arm and guiding him to one of the tables. "We must think clearly about this. First. Whence came the team?"

"The team? . . ." Brian's forearms rested on the edge of the board, his hands curved limply, palm upward. "Why I suppose they returned here after she was taken."

"Why here?"

Hob slapped his palm on the table. "Why indeed?"

Brian straightened, staring at one man and then the other. "Of course. They would have no association with here. They could have wandered anywhere. Someone brought them here."

Hob nodded excitedly. "Someone who wants you to come after him . . ." His lip curled upward sardonically. "Someone who cares not for young damsels, but who lusts for massive men."

"Ranulf," Brian growled.

"Aye, Ranulf of Briarthwaite."

Brian shook his head wiping his hand across the lower part of his mouth. The hideous picture of the slender, gentle girl in the hands of that perverted fiend rose in his mind. His hand sought the medallion beneath his shirt. His green eyes glittered with the intensity of his feeling. *Mucro Mors Cristo*. Never had the motto meant more than it did at that moment. The ungodly Ranulf would die on his sword point. He swore it.

"We must be off on the trail." Brian pushed back the bench with a violent shove of his legs.

Hob grabbed his wrist. "But carefully," he advised, looking up into the man's set face. "Carefully. Cautiously. Sit back down and let us plan." When Brian would have jerked away, the smaller man's grasp tightened. "Please. You can do nothing to save her from what



they have done to her at first. I dare say she was taken yesterday sometime in the afternoon as she left the depot."

At the suggestion that she had been maltreated, Brian swore graphically.

Beside him, Harry Bailey nudged his elbow. "You have to keep a cool head, my lord," he admonished.

"They wanted me!" Brian rounded on Harry, his voice rising to a roar. "She has suffered this . . . this atrocity for my sake. *I* got her into this. *I* was so sure that because that swine claimed to be a knight, I could just walk in and remind him of his vows and all would be well. Damn! Damn his soul to everlasting hell."

The other two sat silent unable to gainsay him.

"I must go to her," Brian rose from the table and headed for the stairs. "I shall follow the route to the quartermaster depot. Undoubtedly, they waylaid her somewhere between here and there and carried her away. They want me to find them. I shall do so. They will leave clues. The rats want the cat to chase them until they can surround him and drag him down."

"I will be your shield at your back, Sir Brian," Hob volunteered, springing after him.

"You—"

"The lady was always kind to me," the squire reminded Brian. "She is a brave and true lady."

"She is a little fool, with more pride than sense," Brian fussed as he reached the room.

"She did not seem so foolish the night she rescued you," Hob reminded him.

"They will be after her blood for that," Brian sighed as he buckled on the heavy fustian tunic that went under his armor.

"Will you dress in full armor?" Hob could not suppress the disbelief in his voice.

"No," Brian replied. "But this will give me a modicum of protection. "I will wear my mail shirt. That will turn a few points."

Within minutes Brian was dressed. At the door of the inn they found Harry had ordered their horses saddled. "Go with God." The innkeeper embraced Hob, patting him long on the back and hugging the younger man to his heart. "Return here when you have rescued her," he called, raising his hand in farewell. "You can all stay free." His lips twitched into a semblance of a smile.

"God and Saint George," Hob swore. "Harry must have taken a real liking to young Gil. He never promised anyone a free night before."

As the pair galloped out of the inn on the road toward Greenwich, Ranulf, at his post among the dripping trees, chuckled. He congratulated himself that he had not waited long. Brian de Trenanay was so predictable. All honor and no brains. He would be a most amusing man to play with for a time.

The squire was another matter entirely. Turncoat scum! Ranulf closed his fist tightly over the handle of his whip. Too bad he had not had Hob in his hands last night. The skipper of the *Maudelayne* could have disposed of two as easily as one. The price might have been a little higher, but the results would have been worth it.

Ranulf frowned. The presence of the squire complicated things slightly. He presented the distinct possibility that the man loitering near the depot to supply Brian with false information might be recognized. Ranulf shook his head. What difference! If the fellow's story were convincing enough, the two would follow his false

clue even better because they believed him to be one of Ranulf's men.

With a smile that did not reach his eyes, Ranulf turned his horse and rode down the other side of the hill to the small inn he had made his headquarters.

Throughout the miserable ride to Greenwich, Brian managed to sustain himself on his anger. Amidst rumbling thunder and torrential rain, he pushed the destrier to the limit. His own skin was burning hot; his face, flushed. The blood of battle drummed in his ears. Desperately, he pushed the images of Ranulf's cruelties to the back of his mind.

The guards at the palisade passed them through without comment. Yes, according to their records a commission from York Minster had been delivered the day before. The signatures were in order. Would Brian care to see them?

Brian shook his head. No one but Gillian would have delivered the commission. She had guarded it with her life. She would not have trusted it to anyone else. What had she done with the payment?

The quartermaster waved his quill pen. "The gold was paid directly to the man who made the delivery. If he carried it away with him, there is the end so far as we are concerned. If he chose to risk robbery and probable murder on his way home, those things are his business. If he chose the easy sensible way, Giske will have a record." He indicted the stone depot.

Without inquiring, Brian knew Gillian would have made a Hansa deposit. His own strength and pride in his independence, combined with the fact that he had never had much gold in his possession, had precluded his dealings with the merchant bankers, but he knew their

reputed honesty. Craftsmen and tradesmen who dealt with money had developed the League to protect themselves when they transported goods to be sold at distant spots. His little fletcher would not have taken a chance on carrying gold in her wagon across the length of England.

Brian turned bleakly to Hob. "She was here," he confirmed unnecessarily. "But where she went after she left here, or how long since she left is a mystery."

The squire nodded staring round the almost deserted bailey. In contrast to the usual bustle, the violence of the storm had kept activity to a minimum. "Will you step into the mess with me, my lord?" he asked at last. "We could make inquiries there or perhaps pick up a word of gossip."

Brian pushed the cowl of his tunic back and ran a hand through his soaked hair. "A good idea." He nodded without much conviction. As Hob turned to lead the way, Brian caught the other's arm. "Forget about calling me my lord. We are not part of a pageant or a joust. Just two men trying to find a friend who is lost and in deep trouble."

Hob's mouth quirked up at the corner in a suggestion of a smile. "We are that," he nodded. Other comments leaped to mind, but he firmly shut his mouth. He could not tell how long the truce with the Frenchman would last. The man was insufferably arrogant at the same time he was incredibly naïve. The combination made for an uncomfortable association. With just the hint of a shrug, the man who had been Howard of Rothingham led his companion out of the rain.

Brian's accent immediately set him apart from the men he sought to question. A couple of them stared at him

blankly. Then one burly yeoman marked him for the others by spitting contemptuously into the rushes at Brian's feet. With an effort the knight controlled himself. Such effrontery before one's betters would have been handled summarily in France. But this was not France. He realized his own life might very well be in danger in this room which fairly bristled with hostility.

Again he controlled himself, backing away from the hard eyes that regarded him from all sides. For Gillian's sake he would put aside his pride. The thought gave him satisfaction. When he got Gillian back, he would tell her . . . what? He eased himself back into an unobtrusive position near the door. There he folded his arms and waited, trying not to appear anxious as his eyes followed Hob around the room.

At last the squire returned, shaking his head. "No one knows anything," he reported in a low voice. "Or if they do, they will not speak. Damn! I should have remembered your French accent. You can easily pass for an Englishman with your fair hair and pale complexion. We think of Frenchman as small and dark. But that damned accent gave you away. Next time keep your mouth shut."

Huffily, Brian stiffened. "If there is a next time."

"You want to find her, do you not?"

A man somewhat younger than the others approached Brian. "Did the lad you are seeking get into trouble?"

"Can you tell us anything?" the knight asked eagerly. His eyes scanned the face of the one who spoke. Such a young lad might have had conversation with Gillian. She might have given some hint. "Did he speak of going directly home?"

The youth looked slyly around him. "I might have heard him say something. And I might be mistaken."

"Anything you can tell us," Brian urged, his fists clenched in frustration. "We have nowhere to go from here."

The youth looked at the squire who stood at the knight's left shoulder. Hastily, his eyes slid away. He raised a hand and wiped the lower part of his face. "He said he was on his way back to York." The youth swallowed hard and licked his lips as if his throat were dry. "Has he gotten into trouble?"

"We fear so," Hob replied, his face revealing nothing.

"Too bad. Lots of sad things happen to young men these days."

Hob's bright blue eyes narrowed slightly. "Indeed," he agreed.

"Can you give us some direction? Did you see him when he left?" Brian asked impatiently.

"No." The youth shook his head emphatically. "We just talked a bit. He said he was going home directly. Said he missed his home. Been away a long time, he had."

"'Tis true," Brian agreed.

The youth peered from beneath his lashes. "He asked me the quickest way across the river."

"And you told him," Hob supplied quietly. The squire had been staring at a spot on the wall seeming to be paying no attention.

The youth flashed him a swift glance before looking directly at Brian. "I told him about the ferry over to the east about half a mile."

Brian hit one fist into the palm of the other. "A ferry a mile to the east." He turned to Hob eagerly. "Shall we try for it?"

Hob appeared to be chewing on something. "Oh, by all means," he smiled pleasantly into the face of their

informant. "I have a feeling that we may have struck the trail, thanks to you. How may we repay you for this valuable information?"

The young man held up his hands in protest. "Oh, I want no pay. Just hope you find your friend all right. He was a real kind person. Real friendly. I liked him when I met him."

Hob nodded cynically, but Brian withdrew some coins from his purse and pressed them into the youth's hand as he shook it. "Use these to buy something for another friend, if you do not want them yourself. *Merci. Merci beaucoup.*"

Outside, Hob trailed behind when Brian hurried toward the horses. As the Frenchman swung up and would have galloped off, Hob caught the bridle. "You are the most credulous man I have ever met," he sighed.

"What mean you? Leave off. Mount and ride. Every minute the trail grows colder." Brian tugged on the reins impatiently.

"Ride without the palisade," Hob commanded, "but do not be so hasty as to take the lane to the ferry." His English blue eyes were cold and steady brooking no further argument.

Sullenly, Brian did as the squire commanded.

"Did you never think that man might have been looking for us to give us information?"

Brian scratched his chin. "He must have overheard us making inquiries."

"He might, except that he was lounging near the door all the time we were talking. I doubt that he could have heard anything."

"Perhaps someone else told him that we were asking about Gil."

Raindrops spattered the squire's face as he faced Brian. The corner of his mouth lifted in a cynical smirk. "Perhaps he is one of Ranulf's men, if man he may be called. I have seen him only once or twice. He is one of the *gentlemen of the chamber*."

Brian swore, reining his horse around as if to head back to the depot.

"Wait, Brian." Hob's voice betrayed his irritation. "For God's sake, think. You cannot ride back into the English garrison and take one of the men. They would be on you in an instant. You would do Gil no good."

Brian pulled the destrier back. "You are right." His urgency subsided. "What shall we do? Wait until he leaves and then follow him."

"For a time." The squire smiled at the idea that Brian would allow any man who was not a knight to give commands. "Then we will take a hostage of our own. Ranulf will not want his lover harmed."



## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

"Ah, Hereward." Ranulf greeted the young man with open arms, dragging him against his chest and planting a kiss on the youth's rain-dampened cheek. "You did your work well. They did not suspect."

Hereward stood stiffly in the arms of his lover, his eyes sliding uncomfortably over Wat, who raised an eyebrow and nodded in mock salute. Wat lounged insolently, one long leg thrown over the arm of the carved wooden chair at the head of the table. His flat gray eyes never blinked.

"I took care, my lord Ranulf."

"I knew you could. To be sure. You are a clever boy. Did I not say he was a clever boy, Wat?" Ranulf patted Hereward on the back with uncommon affection.

"You did, my lord."

Ranulf laughed gustily as he strode to the table and poured ale for the three of them. "So they are on their

way to the ferry below Greenwich."

"Yes, my lord."

Ranulf cupped both of Hereward's hands around the flagon and lifted the drink to his petulant lips. "Drink deep. You deserve a reward for performing this task so well." He chuckled excitedly as the youth drank. "Let them ride all day in the rain. Let them exhaust themselves and their horses. Let them catch the lung fever if God so wills." He transferred one hand to the youthful shoulder, rubbing seductively with his thumb.

"I hope they have sense enough to let Guy find them," Wat snorted contemptuously.

"They will be searching and asking everywhere." Hereward's expression was blank as he lowered the cup. Sensing Wat's antipathy, he could appreciate the threat the man brought to his own position as lover to Ranulf. A man of small stature and smaller expectations, he had submitted to the lord of Briarthwaite without demur. The relationship had brought a measure of comfort and security . . . until now. He stared at Wat from beneath lowered lids.

Ranulf stared from man to man, another wave of excitement shivering through him. He bared his teeth between his thin lips. Their obvious rivalry for his favor promised delicious nights ahead. His eyes slitted as he breathed deeply to calm himself.

A peremptory knock broke the tense silence. Ranulf glanced at Wat inquiringly, receiving a shrug in reply. "Answer it, sweetbrier," he bade the youth. Sullenly, Hereward flung the door wide without actually looking to see who stood on the threshold.

Brian de Trenanay rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. Eyes like dark jade, he strode into the room. So

tall, so menacing, so deadly, the embodiment of his own motto, he moved amongst them and they fell back before him. Behind him Hob closed the door decisively and leaned back against it with arms folded. The light glinted off the uplifted point of a dagger in front of his left shoulder.

Ranulf paled, his colorless eyes shifting from his adversaries to his two allies. The boy Hereward fell back almost paralyzed by shock, but Wat was another matter. Galvanized into action, he sprang up, drawing the dagger he carried ever at his belt. Placing the heavy walnut chair between himself and Brian, he waited for the command.

Knowing the odds better than even, Ranulf recovered himself. "Ah, Sir Brian, so good of you to drop by to renew our acquaintance. May I offer you some ale? Hereward can just step downstairs for another flagon."

"I did not come for social amenities." Brian extended his arm to detain the youth. "I remember too well your treatment of visitors."

Ranulf smiled unpleasantly. "Well, perhaps I was a trifle rough, but big fellows like you sometimes turn so savage. I promise you, you would have ended enjoying yourself."

Brian's face turned a dull red, but he controlled his rage. "Where is Gil?" he asked through set teeth.

"Your disgusting little friend?" Ranulf waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, he, or more correctly she, is where she can be reached if you intend to become unpleasant."

Ranulf's words reassured Brian, but Hob noticed a stiffening in Wat's figure along with a flicker of surprise in the henchman's face. Gillian was not all right, if Wat's demeanor were any indication.

"Let her go," Brian demanded. "Send this catamite with Hob to take her away and I will submit to whatever you want. I swear."

Ranulf ran his tongue across his lower lip. The thought of the big savage knight bowing to him stirred him mightily. The man's muscles were like steel bands; his legs, like tree trunks. And best of all, the man would be compelled by his own knightly oath and his fear for the girl. "Ah, but for how long? You would ride away when you saw your transvestite friend safe," he turned his back as if the conversation bored him.

In a movement swifter than the henchman could forestall, Brian caught the man's shoulder. "You would discover my methods of persuasion, Ranulf?" he questioned angrily. "I bear you no love. You deserve a taste of your own medicine."

Ranulf looked contemptuously at the callused hand despite the agonizing force of the grip. "You will never discover her that way," he sneered. "Come, Sir Brian, is a term in my . . . employment so loathesome? Certainly it would be preferable to a term spent laying a seige or fighting a series of skirmishes. Much less dangerous too."

"How long a term?"

Ranulf smiled. His eyebrow lifted languidly. "I would hope we might become friends. You might find you would desire to stay longer."

"How long?" Brian felt his skin prickling.

"How long do you usually take to become friends with someone?"

Brian swallowed. "A week."

"Why one hardly gets to know a person in a week."

"A fortnight," Brian bargained. An angry flush

stained his cheeks.

"Do you swear?"

"When Gil is released into Hob's care, when I see them ride away safe together then I swear to be your"—he swallowed convulsively—"... your man or whatever you want ... for a fortnight."

Ranulf's mind was working rapidly. The girl was already dead. Her fate had been sealed the moment she had been dumped into the hold of the *Maudelayne*. But Wat could lead Hob away and dispose of him. In the meantime a drug in Brian's ale would render him unconscious until he could be chained up. "Hereward does not know where she is kept," Ranulf explained. "He shall remain here to wait upon us while Wat takes your squire to fetch the little slut." His tone eloquently portrayed his disgust with both of Brian's companions.

"I think not . . ." Brian began.

"A reasonable arrangement, my lord." Hob spoke from behind him for the first time. "Everyone should be satisfied by that arrangement."

Brian turned to peer intently at his squire, trying to read the message in that stony face. At length he shrugged. Hob was no novice. He would not allow the henchman to get behind him.

When Brian turned back, the tableau had broken. Wat moved from behind the chair, skirting the center of the room. Hereward melted back into the shadows of the corner. After refilling his flagon of ale, Ranulf took the chair that Wat had vacated. Unconsciously he adopted almost the same posture as the younger man had held. The difference lay in the fact that his position really was a pose. Through slitted eyes he watched the two leave before returning his attention to Brian.

"Sit," he gestured jovially. "Bring ale, Hereward. Fresh ale. You know Hereward is really the most charming young man," he declared expansively. "So inventive and receptive to all my suggestions for gratifying my needs."

Brian sat stiffly at the bench. His stomach jumped and quivered. Gillian had been held captive by this swine for over twenty-four hours. The thought of her pure innocence at Ranulf's mercy drove him frantic.

When he got her back, he vowed he would lavish on her long hours of tender care to restore her spirit as well as her body. She had suffered because of him and his stupidity. He would not trust this creature out of his sight. Yet he kept his face impassive effectively concealing his thoughts.

The boy entered, bearing the laden tray which he presented to Ranulf, who inspected it nonchalantly. With a wave he sent it to Brian. "This is poor stuff," he apologized softly, watching to see that the knight took the flagon meant for him. "The ale of Briarthwaite is justly famous all around Leeds."

Brian said nothing but regarded his would-be tormentor steadily.

"Come. Drink up." Ranulf suited his words with the action. "The day is stormy, but we are warm and dry here. A bit of liquid refreshment will help to while away the hours. Wat has quite a long way to take the squire. And once there they will have to return."

Brian lifted the flagon to his mouth, moistening his lips, taking only a tiny sip. It was bitter as Ranulf had said. Yet he was thirsty. He took a mouthful.

Ranulf smiled, brushing a lock of his lank hair back from his temple and trailing his hand down his neck. "I

would never have seriously hurt you, you know." His voice was soft and gentle, like a woman's. "You angered me."

Brian's hand tightened around the stem of the flagon. He took a swallow in an effort to clear the evil taste from his mouth. "You are a knight!" he blurted at last.

Ranulf shrugged; his shoulder rose in a contemptuous shrug. "And what is a knight? A hired killer. A thief with a nobleman's permission to loot and rape."

"No." Brian denied. "We are the first to live by our word. We pay homage to the lord and defend his honor with our own."

Ranulf chuckled softly. "How many lords do you swear allegiance to, Sir Brian?"

Brian looked surprised. "My homage to my liege is paramount," he replied stiffly.

"And who is your liege," Ranulf inquired suavely, "when you are not in France, that is?"

"I owe no Englishman my allegiance," Brian insisted.

"Oh, of course not." Ranulf made a stiff face in mockery of Brian's icy expression. "How did you happen to be bringing our little arrowmaker to London?"

"I owed her a debt."

"And to discharge your debt you guarded her journey to deliver her arrows to the arms depot of Henry V. . . ."

Brian took another drink from the flagon. Despite his discomfiture as he realized the direction the conversation was taking, he did not feel his muscles tensing as they might have done. He shook his head to clear a faint buzzing from his ears. "I owed her . . ." he insisted. His tongue felt slightly thick. He looked suspiciously at the flagon. "Besides arrows cannot damage castle walls or go through a well-made piece of armor plate."

"Castle walls . . ." Ranulf sneered. "Cannon, my dear fellow. Cannon *can* and do knock down castle walls. Time was when a lord could hide behind his walls and send his knights out to attack whatever threatened him while he stayed safe and sound. Those days are gone forever." He made a sweeping gesture with the hand that held the flagon, ending up with it tipped to his mouth.

"Cannon are almost as dangerous to the one who fires them as to the one they are fired against," Brian observed.

"But they will improve," his adversary replied smoothly. "They will improve. Mark my words. I have not bothered to rebuild the fortifications that were around Briarthwaite. A waste of money, not to mention, time."

Brian shook his head again focusing his eyes carefully on Ranulf's face which through a trick of light seemed to blur slightly. "A knight should not be concerned with money."

Chuckling cynically, Ranulf rose from the chair to help himself to another flagon of ale. "Why do you insist upon those outmoded ideals?" He strolled over to Brian studying him interestedly.

"They are not outmoded. They are . . . They are . . . God given."

His lips curling into a smile, Ranulf brought his slender fingers to rest on Brian's shoulder. The knight shrugged irritably seeking to throw off his adversary, but Ranulf merely moved his hand inward toward the side of Brian's neck. "God given . . ." Ranulf shook his head, his eyes reflecting his amazement. "God given." He pushed Brian gently back against the edge of the table.

Brian's head tilted back on his shoulders as he stared



defiantly up into Ranulf's dark eyes. "I made my vows to God," he insisted. "My motto is my bond. *Mucro Mors Cristo.*"

Ranulf tapped him on the cheek. "How fierce," he murmured gazing down into the gold-flecked green eyes. "And how naïve."

Brian carefully set the flagon down and took a grip on the edge of the table. Using his hand as a prop, he levered himself up until he forced the slighter man to step backward. "I have fought in tournaments in England and France for years," he declared coldly. "Sometimes I have been bested, but most of the time I have won handily. But each time I have fought fairly giving God the victory. When I have fought in battles, I have fought always for France."

He had pulled himself erect and stood steadily. Now the effort seemed too much. He subsided onto the bench. He felt a taste of brass in his mouth. Licking his lower lip, he reached for the flagon. Over its rim he stared at Ranulf's back.

"The king or Burgundy?" Ranulf threw over his shoulder contemptuously.

Brian paused nonplused.

Ranulf swung round, one eyebrow lifted quizzically. "The old mad king or the Duke of Burgundy—or, for that matter, the party of Orléans." He watched Brian draw in a deep breath. "Come, come! You must have some concept of the politics of your native country. To which of those estimable gentlemen do you owe allegiance. Or do you owe allegiance to them all?"

"The king," Brian choked.

"Ah, the king." Ranulf nodded sarcastically. "But the king is mad."

"He is still my king."

"As Harry of Monmouth is mine. But these are troubled times. When I was a boy, the king was Richard of Bordeaux, but Harry's father killed him. How can you decide which one deserves your allegiance? Defend the murdered and end up murdered yourself. Swear allegiance to the man who pays you. That is my motto."

"I will fight for lilies of France."

"But who will wear them? The king, the new Duke of Orleans, or Burgundy? Oh, we hear across the channel," Ranulf smiled his sardonic smile. "'Tis for the reason of this rivalry that we prepare for war. If the lion of England were to wear the lilies of France, would you fight for him?"

Angrily, Brian rose again. "That will never be," he prophesied. "France will never have an English king."

"England had a French king a few hundred years ago," Ranulf reminded him smoothly as he slipped his hand under Brian's arm. "But I have upset you. Here, let me pour you another drink. Hereward can fix a pallet on the floor for you, or you can lie down on my own bed. Are you ill?"

"Hot," Brian whispered. His eyes glazed. Feverishly he licked his lips. "The drink, the drink."

Ranulf sighed as Brian staggered crazily away, falling to one knee. "Yes, the drink. You really should learn to get over this naïve trust, Sir Brian." Setting his flagon down on the table, he followed his quarry across the room.

Brian fumbled at his belt for his sword.

"Oh, no!" Ranulf wrested the weapon from his trembling hand. "None of that. After all, you promised to submit yourself. Here you are resisting and trying to

draw your sword." The Lord of Briarthwaite made a clucking sound with his tongue as he disarmed Brian completely.

"P-Promised to submit when . . . Gillian . . . freed."

"True. But there is no reason to wait around," Ranulf sneered. "She may be a long time coming. We are here together through the long evening."

Clumsily Brian struck out, his long arm cuffing Ranulf across the ear. Even drugged as he was, his strength against the slighter man was prodigious. Ranulf staggered sideways, the smile slipping from his face to be replaced by a grimace of pain and anger. "Keepsh m' vow when I shee Gil . . . an' Hob," Brian insisted. "'Til then . . . keeps y'r dishtance."

"I could send for my men to tie you," Ranulf reminded him. His slender hands were doubled into fists. "I could chain you so tightly you could not move a finger."

"But thash not wha' y' want." Brian shook his head like a beleaguered bull. "Y' want me willin'." He grinned a travesty of a grin. His lips felt stiff as uncured leather. He could not make them move as he willed.

Suddenly, Ranulf relaxed. "You are right." He nodded, his face assuming its pleasant lines. "Of course. Please be seated, Sir Brian. The strain of keeping yourself upright must be terrible."

"I c'n handle m'self," Brian insisted, reeling on his feet. Sweat drenched him. His blond hair was plastered to his forehead in damp dark fishhooks. A growing nausea seemed to swell in his belly. Swallowing with difficulty, he welcomed it. When the time came, he could void his stomach of the disgusting brew and be little the worse for wear. Now he concentrated on remaining moderately alert. Let Ranulf think he was helpless or virtually so.

The man would grow overconfident.

Ranulf, for his part, regarded the reeling man with satisfaction. No stranger to the effects of the drug he had employed, he recognized the first signs of paralysis. As the mighty muscles relaxed, the man would grow more and more helpless. He would be able to feel everything but would be unable to move a hand. His body would lie open to Ranulf's caresses and punishments, too. Able to feel everything, but unable to resist. The thought made Ranulf shiver with anticipation.

"Where's Hob?" Brian peered round him. The room seemed murky.

"Why we sent him with Wat to fetch the little arrow-maker," Ranulf replied silkily. "Surely you remember?"

"Hard t' see," Brian rasped. "Need t' stay 'lert."

But Ranulf was beside him. The gentle fingers trailed down Brian's cheek. "Of course, you need to stay alert." He snickered. "But 'tis a difficult act with so much ale. You should have been more cautious, my dear fellow."

The door creaked behind them. Ranulf threw a glance over his shoulder, then froze. His fist clutched the material of Brian's tunic. With a squeal of alarm he swung Brian around so that the knight's wide body formed a shield between him and the door.

Wat's bleeding figure stumbled into the room. The henchman dropped to his knees before falling face down, groaning, one leg kicking feebly. Hob stood in the doorway, his dagger drawn. "Let him go, Ranulf," he commanded. "Your man has admitted that 'twould be hard to bring the lady to our side short of the French coast."

The words "French coast" alerted Ranulf. He glanced at Wat, who lay face down, his hands bound behind him.

"What did he do to the girl?" Ranulf stepped from behind Brian, feigning surprise. "I ordered him to keep her safe," he shrilled.

"Oh? . . ." Hob's face was steely. Disbelief rang in the single syllable.

"What did you do, you savage?" Ranulf snarled at Wat's prone figure.

With a groan the man stirred, rolled over on his side, and lifted his head. "I dropped her in the hold of a barge bound for France," he whispered. "Safe enough. She might get a little hungry if they fail to discover her before they unload the cargo."

Brian pulled himself away from Ranulf and staggered past him to Hob's side. He did not turn back to face the room. "Ge' me out o' here," he whispered.

The squire put a sympathetic hand on the knight's upper arm. "Can you make the horses? They are just below."

At Brian's nod Hob patted his shoulder. "Go on. I will finish here."

Brian paused. "Didsh y' fin' out th' name of ship and ish port?"

Hob shook his head. "He said he just picked one with the cargo hatch open."

"He lies. 'Twas planned. Run a blade under 'is ribs if he doesn't speak."

Hob knelt beside Wat.

"The *Maudelayne* for Calais!" the man screamed before the dagger could touch his garments.

Hob smiled thinly. "I bid you good night, gentlemen." He backed for the door through which Brian had left. Slamming it behind him, he heard Ranulf's raging curse.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Hob raced down the stairs to catch Brian's stumbling figure halfway across the inn yard. Throwing an arm around the massive shoulders, he guided the knight toward their waiting mounts. Oblivious to the squire's assistance, Brian concentrated on lifting his foot the almost impossible distance to the stirrup. Even with his toe finally in place, he would have measured his length back into the yard had not Hob boosted him.

"What happened?" the squire gasped, heaving with all his might to lift the larger man into the saddle.

"Drugged me." Brian's stomach roiled alarmingly. His legs felt leaden; he could not feel his feet at all. Perspiration drenched his clothing and dripped into his eyes stinging and blinding them.

"Fool!" Hob snarled. "Why did you drink with Ranulf?"

Laboriously, Brian swung his leg over his horse's withers. Only instinct enabled him to sit a saddle. He could not find the stirrup on the right side and allowed his leg to dangle uselessly. "Play 'long," he mumbled. "Learn 'bout G-Gil. . . ."

Hob shook his head disgustedly. Catching up the trailing reins, he tried to thrust them into Brian's hand but found the fingers too numb to hold them. The heavy body sank forward in semiconsciousness, his cheek pressed against the horse's neck. "Hang on!" Hob shouted in Brian's ear. His fingers tangled in the long mane.

Not a moment too soon, Hob sprang to his saddle. The occupants of the inn would be roused by Ranulf soon. Hob dug spurs to his mount and galloped from the inn yard, dragging Brian's mount behind him.

The motion of the horse further stirred Brian's nausea. Grimly, he set his teeth to endure, clenching his hands into weak fists in his effort to hang on and not to hinder their escape. Suddenly, Hob swerved the horses aside into the inky darkness of a grove of trees.

The twist of his mount's body slung Brian from the saddle. He landed with a bone-shattering thud in the middle of the road. The fall left him completely paralyzed for a moment, limp as a sack of meal, too weak even to curse.

Fortunately for the downed man, Hob halted the horses in the depth of the copse. With an exclamation of alarm, the squire sprang down and dashed on foot back to the road. The sound of retching guided him. "Brian," he called softly. Wide sweeps of his hands soon located the huddled figure in the roadbed. Encountering the hip first, the squire ran his hand up the shuddering frame to

the shoulder and finally to the forehead.

Brian gratefully accepted the strong hand that brushed his soaked hair back as it supported him in his weakness. "Sorry," he muttered.

"We must get into the trees," Hob insisted. Even as he spoke, the vibrations of approaching hooves shook the road. Dragging himself up to his hands and knees, Brian made his way, with Hob's help, to the side and into a ditch. The violent effort brought on a recurrence of the heaving that had rendered him helpless on the road.

Hob patted the Frenchman's shoulder sympathetically. "I am going back to the horses. If their pursuit stops along here, I will make a noise to try to lead them away." With that he was gone.

"Good man," Brian murmured between clenched teeth. Too weak even to express his thanks, he concentrated on getting his body under control. His terrible sweats had suddenly given place to chills. The night air had changed from ministering spirit to tormentor as it blew against the knight's soaked head and plastered his clothing to his shivering body. Dear God! What had he drunk? Dizzily, he shook his head, then moaned as that motion only increased its swimming sensation and brought on another bout of vomiting.

Like all strong men Brian had been secure in his strength. The idea of a few sips of liquid rendering him helpless had been absurd. Now the treachery of his own body, his inability to control its most basic functions, tormented his spirit. When Gillian needed him, when Hob had to take the responsibility for them both, when Ranulf threatened them all, he could only lie in a muddy ditch and shiver.

Distant thunder rumbled. The horses slowed to a brisk



trot but continued on without pause past the place where he lay. Drops of rain splattered his bowed neck with painful icy force.

Hob called softly from the darkness, "Sir Brian?"

"Here."

"Can you stand? We must be away."

"I can try." Brian braced himself upward on arms that trembled alarmingly. "Damn! Weak as a baby."

"Hurry."

Laboriously, Brian straightened to his knees. The squire led the horse forward until Brian could grasp the stirrup and pull himself up hand over hand.

The rain was coming down in earnest now. Great pelting sheets of it washed the sweat away. As he pulled himself erect, Brian tilted his head back, welcoming the coolness into his mouth.

"For God's sake," the squire whispered trying to steady the swaying man.

"Mouth tastes like a mucky stable." Brian shook the rain from his eyes and climbed into the saddle.

"Let us away," Hob urged.

"For the harbor," Brian insisted.

"No!" Hob shook his head disgustedly. "Think, man. Back to Harry's. We need dry clothes, as well as our other garments and belongings. The voyage to Calais is not a short one."

"Er . . . right," Brian muttered in a chastened voice. "I just . . ." He paused, swallowing hard. "I just . . ."

"I know. Your lady may be in desperate peril, but we cannot help her this night." Hob thrust the reins into the larger man's hands and led the way back through the building storm.

Brian for his own part hunched miserably in his

saddle. As feeling gradually returned to his extremities and his stomach settled into a more normal mode, he faced the more painful thorns of a guilty conscience. He had caused all of this turmoil by his own actions. If he had not been so sure that Ranulf was a gentleman by virtue of knighthood, the three of them would not have been pursued. If he had not been so determined to continue his senseless quarrel with Hob and if he had not gotten stupidly drunk, Gillian would never have set out alone and unprotected to Greenwich.

Gillian! Hob had called her his lady. Brian could not gainsay him. Yet how different she was from the ladies of the romances. His mind wandered over her slender body, her straightforward gaze, her strong hands that caressed him to such delirious heights of passion. She was no shy and modest maid, nor one to weep and pray for him when he was in danger. Not she! She had caught up her bow and arrows and come to his rescue. He could still see her standing straight and tall, her eye trained down the shaft of the arrow.

The thought of her peril wrung his heart. Almost he moaned aloud at the thought of her in Ranulf's cruel hands. What had that perverse beast done to her? Especially when he'd discovered her true sex. Creatures of that kind had no use for females. Yet this one might appeal to him. Her slender form dressed in boy's garments might have excited him to . . . Brian cursed softly. He could not think of such depredations. They would drive him mad.

A streak of lightning lanced the sky, grounding somewhere close by, and was accompanied in the next instant by an ear-splitting clap of thunder. What if she were dead? Brian writhed in the saddle. He could not imagine a

future world if he had to live knowing that Gillian were not inhabiting it somewhere.

Limned in the flames of whatever the lightning had struck, Hob jumped from the saddle. "We must lead the horses," he shouted. "Keep their heads down as much as possible. Thank God, you are not wearing your armor."

Brian nodded wearily as he swung down. That armor was becoming more trouble than it was worth, he decided as he plodded head down behind the dripping rump of Hob's horse.

"You have no obligation to follow me to France." Brian tied the last of his armor to the back of the destrier before turning to say farewell to his host.

Hob ignored the comment as he, too, fastened the belongings he'd rolled inside his kit. "'Tis long since I have been in France," he announced as if they discussed travel arrangements of no importance. "No problem with the language. France is nice this time of year."

"You owe me no obligation," Brian insisted.

"I understand that . . . but you need a squire, and I need a knight. I may not be your first choice, but at least I know the lady we are seeking. Two may look in twice as many places."

A warm feeling spread about Brian's heart. He turned to offer his hand, a smile on his face. "So long as you understand that I still have little use for Englishmen. Although you are the exception. Are you sure you are not French?"

"With a name like Rothingham . . ."

Brian chuckled. "Mount up, Howard of Rothingham." With a wave to Harry Bailey, the two galloped out of

Muddy and bedraggled, Gillian Fletcher nevertheless grinned in satisfaction as she strode along on dry land. The feel of firm rocky ground under her feet restored her drooping spirits. She had escaped death twice now. When the icy waters of the North Sea had closed over her head, she had been almost paralyzed with terror. But when her feet had touched the sandy bottom, she knew she was going to live. Clearly, she was not born to be drowned. Where she was bound, she did not know, but so long as she moved inland away from the sea, she felt she was moving in the right direction.

At the top of a rise, several hills' distance from the sea, she paused to study her surroundings. Only the gray line of water now appeared in the west. Even the *Maudelayne* and its bloody crew had disappeared. To the north and east lay forested acres, their trees concealing any signs of habitation. Away to the south, the path she had followed became a road. Go where the people are, she advised herself. Find some good merchants and earn your passage home.

Her stomach rumbled softly. She was hungry, but her hunger was not an emergency. She could go for the rest of the day without food. The welcome sun began to burn away the clouds, drying out her clothing, leaving it stained and stiff with salt but otherwise comfortable.

Grimacing, she raised both hands and ran her fingers through her tangled hair. She could just imagine what she looked like. Before her eyes she saw her damaged wrists. Best keep her sleeves pulled down. Catching sight of those bruised and scored members, someone might

think her an escaped felon. She had been lucky beyond belief to cheat the fate Ranulf had ordained for her.

The thought of her deliverance thrilled her. Luck had been with her. She spared a minute of sympathy for the youth lost overboard in the storm. His death, whoever he might have been, had saved her life. She must remember to light a candle for him and pay for a mass for his soul. As for Ranulf, she condemned him to everlasting fire with her next thought. At the memory of his anger when he'd discovered her sex, she shook her head in wonderment. The world was certainly full of strange people outside the walls of York Minster.

Pulling her shirt sleeves down over the backs of her hands, she started down the road. Before long her natural buoyant spirit brought forth a tuneless whistle. Instinctively she felt she was heading for home.

She walked and rested alternately for the greater part of the day. The sun was well down in the sky before she beheld the tip of a church spire over the distant hill. The sight quickened her step.

On the outskirts of the town, she came to a large, well-appointed manor house. Did she dare try to find shelter and work there? What language these people spoke, she could not guess. French was a good possibility, although it could be Dutch or Danish for all she knew. She shrugged philosophically. She had a working knowledge of only one language, her own native English. All others including church Latin were incomprehensible to her.

Running her fingers through her hair again and straightening her sea-stained smock, she passed through the gate into a small inner courtyard. A large brindle hound sprang silently, teeth bared, from the shadows beside the door.

The speed and unexpectedness of the attack tore a shriek from Gillian. Terrified she flung herself at the low branch of a tree that overshadowed the flagstones of the court. Swinging herself up, barely ahead of its snapping jaws, she clung in panic.

"Ee-ee-easy." She hoisted herself farther above its slavering fangs. The silent attack had given way now to hoarse staccato howls, loud enough, Gillian was sure, to waken the dead in the small private burial ground she had observed outside the gate on the other side of the road. Probably some of those in their graves were this monster's personal victims.

The shaggy creature growled fiercely and stretched his length into the air, forepaws on the rough bark, jaws agape to tear and rend should his treed victim seek to come down.

The door to the manor opened. A servant, identifiable by his livery, stood regarding the situation with quiet disinterest. At last he snapped a command to the dog. Instantly, the animal turned without a backward glance and trotted to the man's side. There it crouched, shaggy tail twitching slightly, regarding her balefully.

"Please, sir," she cried, holding out one hand in supplication. "Please, I beg you. I meant no harm. Please call off your hound."

The servant, a man of indeterminate age, thin as a rake, his eyes dark and unreadable in his sallow face, shook his head. His voice low and rasping, he spoke to her in a language she could not understand.

Her spirits sank.

Another voice, softer, more melodious, came from the interior of the house. Hopefully, Gillian looked beyond the servant who turned back obsequiously. The

hound rose to his feet, its hackles settling, its tail wagging eagerly.

An elegant lady stood framed in the door, the point of her metal caul extended upward almost touching the top of the entrance. A drapery of purest sendal wrapped her chin and wove its way through gold mesh until it burst from the top of the headdress and flowed down her back like water. Her gown was blue velvet with a sideless surcoat of brocaded silk accenting her splendid figure.

One tiny black wing of an eyebrow rose quizzically as she stared at the scene before her. "*Jehan, qu'avez-vous ici?*"

Shrugging, the servant replied in the same language.

"Please," Gillian called. "Please, milady. I swear I mean no harm. I am a stranger."

Her face paling slightly, the lady glanced at the servant. "*C'est bien, Jehan. Descendez, mon fils.*" Jehan's mouth opened as if he wished to protest before it closed with a snap. He bent and grasped the heavy studded collar of the hound. The lady motioned hospitably, a timid smile playing about her mouth.

Trembling from reaction and strain, Gillian dropped weakly to the ground. "Oh, thank you, madame." Struggling to rearrange her clothes, she bowed from the waist.

Acknowledging the bow with an imperious nod, the lady gave what could only be orders to the servant. The man raised his hands in protest, releasing the hound as he did so. The animal growled softly at Gillian, who retreated a couple of steps.

Throwing Gillian an apologetic glance, the woman snapped her fingers sending the beast back to the shadows from whence he had risen. Again she spoke to the servant, who withdrew obsequiously. With another

gesture, she instructed Gillian to follow where she led. Then she turned and entered the house, her long drapery of sendal trailing behind her like a soft breath of mist.

Seated at a scarred table in a kitchen at the back of the house, Gillian could scarcely believe her good fortune. With a pleasant smile an old man, his white beard hanging down almost to his ample girth, set a loaf of hard brown bread in front of her. While she watched, he expertly cut off the top and scooped out the center to make a generous trencher. From a pot at the back of the fire, he ladled a delicious smelling *pot-au-feu* into the cavity. Smiling her thanks as well as voicing them in English, she dipped her crust.

At the first bite, she closed her eyes in pleasure, chewing slowly to savor the rich flavors. When she opened them, the cook uncorked a bottle of dark red wine and set it on the table in front of her. Her eyes widened. What generosity! What a wonderful country!

She could appreciate Brian's boasts about his homeland. Her brown eyes glinted with tears. So long as she was in peril among strangers, she could be strong. However, kindness broke through her reserve. Another minute and she would be bawling. To break down would surely reveal her sex. She did not need that problem added to the rest. Clenching her fist in her lap, she smiled a bright smile and murmured her thanks.

The strong wine made her cough at the first draught, but after a few more bites of food the next swallow seemed not so unpalatable. When she had finished, a maid servant, her slumberous eyes appraising the strange male, came to lead Gillian to a tiny room off the stable.

Scarcely had she slumped down on the cot beneath the tiny window than she fell into a deep sleep.



The room was full dark. Only the sounds of the night creatures disturbed the silence. The door opened; its leather hinges made no sound other than the faintest creaking. A crouching figure was outlined briefly against the paler gray of the night sky before it slipped into the room, shutting the door as silently as might be.

Senses long overwrought warned Gillian that someone was in the room with her. The complacent girl of a few weeks ago was gone forever. Danger, as well as the strain of the journey, had honed her nerves to a fine edge. Although the interloper made almost no sound, Gillian's eyes swept open, staring into the darkness, icy shudders of terror trailing along her spine.

Flee! her senses commanded her. Coiling her legs under her, she crouched waiting for the next sound, so that she could move away from it.

"Boy!"

The word was but an explosion of breath. For an instant, Gillian could not believe her ears. Someone was calling to her in English.

"Boy, where are you? I cannot find you in the dark. Oh, please, wake." The voice dissolved into a whimper. The rustle of heavy silk material marked the prowler's movements across the room.

Gillian relaxed slightly. No one would enter to do her harm and then announce his presence. She opened her mouth to speak.

Again the soft whisper. "Boy! Oh, please answer. Oh, please do not be gone." The voice was closer still. Against her face Gillian could feel the movement of air as if someone had swept a hand in an arc trying to find the cot. "Oh! . . ."

The last syllable became a terrified squeak as Gillian

made a grab in the dark and her hand closed over a velvet-clad arm. "Who are you? What do you want? If you seek to rob me, I have nothing except the clothes on my back."

A purely feminine sob burst from the captive who twisted ineffectually in Gillian's strong grip. "Oh, please. I do not seek to rob. I will not harm you. Please . . ."

"What do you want then?" Conscious of her man's role, Gillian dropped her voice to a low growl. "Speak, wench!"

"Oh, please . . . you are hurting me."

Smiling to herself in the darkness, Gillian loosened her grip. She doubted seriously that the lady was in much pain. Probably fear had played its part on her overburdened senses. "Speak! Why are you sneaking around in the dark disturbing a man's sleep?"

With a soft thump the form sank to its knees beside the cot. The hand already in Gillian's grasp was joined by another. Together the two were clasped as if in prayer. "Please . . ." The voice was under control now, low and melodious. "Please, kind sir. Please help a fellow countryman."

"How can I aid you?" Gillian started in surprise, her hand falling away from the fragile wrist.

"Take me back to England with you."

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

Certainly if Gillian had been asked to guess the purpose of her nocturnal visitor, she could never have provided the right answer. For a full minute the two sat frozen in time: one, shocked and amazed by the total improbability of the request; the other, trembling slightly, hardly daring to breathe as her whole future hung on the answer she would receive.

At last Gillian cleared her throat noisily. "Who are you—"

The hands groped in the dark to close over Gillian's knee. "Oh, please, my name is Alys. I must return to England. When I recognized the language, I thought that my prayers had been answered. Oh, please, take me back with you."

Gillian's head whirled. How could she answer this fervent plea? The soft hands clasping her knee trembled; the

fingers twisted nervously.

"Oh, please," Alys whispered again. "You are my only hope. If you do not help me, I have no hope left. I had given up. Then you appeared out of nowhere, speaking English. I had almost forgotten the sound of the tongue."

Sensing the desperation in this soft voice, Gillian patted the clutching fingers. "Why do you need a stranger to take you to England, lady?"

The question brought silence although the soft fingers closed round the hand that patted them.

Gillian made her voice stern. "What crime have you committed that you seek to escape?"

The hand withdrew. "I can help you," the lady promised anxiously. "You do not speak the language. I could do all the talking for us. I could dress as an old man and be your father. I could make arrangements for our passages, even pay for them. I have some jewels that truly belong to me." Her dress rustled softly as if she stirred restlessly. "I would go alone except that I . . . I am afraid. I know nothing of inns or ships . . . or—"

"You have no idea what you are undertaking," Gillian interrupted. "You are a lady, to the manor born. The way is hard. I am bound for Calais—"

Alys interrupted in her turn. "Calais! But that is perfect. The *ville* beyond the manor is Montchambeau. It lies less than twenty leagues from Calais, or so I have heard. The journey takes only a matter of a couple or three days."

Gillian snorted. "Not walking." Her voice betrayed her disgust. "Or do you have some horses 'that truly belong to you'?"

"Well, no . . . But I am strong. Truly I am. I was not gentle born. That is why I must escape." Her voice trem-

bled again. "I must escape," she repeated.

Gillian hesitated. Her better judgment admonished her to wait until the bright light of day to look at this problem. They should talk in the light when she could see the face of this person and judge the truth of her words by her expression.

Furthermore, she herself needed time to think, to weigh both sides of this singular request. In the morning the offer of a translator and gold to finance her speedy return to England might not appear so fair.

"I must think on this, Lady Alys."

Her words drew a soft cry of protest from the kneeling figure. "Oh, please, do not refuse me. I will do anything . . . anything that you ask of me. I can bear anything but the fate my stepson has set for me."

The faintest of gray was stealing into the room through the tiny window. The lady's face was a white shape in the gloom. Gillian covered the quivering lips with her fingers. "Say no more, Lady Alys." She spoke sternly to forestall more tears. I have not said I will *not* accept your good offer. You are right in thinking that I do not speak French. Your aid would be invaluable. I am shipwrecked from an English vessel and need to return to my native land as swiftly as I—"

"Oh, then . . ."

Gillian pressed her fingers firmly against the soft lips. "I want to return in good health, milady. Your . . . er . . . stepson may have good reason for what he does. Remember a woman must obey her liege lord. If your stepson is your liege, then I could be killed for helping you."

Alys subsided. Placing her hands on the edge of the cot, she climbed to her feet. Visibly she straightened as if reclaiming the reserve she had abandoned in her impas-

sioned plea. "May then I summon you to a discussion in the arbor after breakfast?" she inquired distantly, her voice calm as a saint's.

"At that time we can talk more practically," Gillian agreed.

"I bid you *bonne nuit*," Alys walked to the door.

"Lady Alys," Gillian called softly. The woman paused but did not turn back. "Are you English?"

"Indeed," came the low response. "Born at Southampton." And so saying, she passed out through the door and closed it quietly behind her.

In the arbor, the big brindle hound at her knee, Lady Alys of Bellepaix stared with frightened intensity around her. "We must be quick. They watch me closely now. What do you want to know about me? I will tell all that you wish to know. Anything to convince you of my dire need. If Jules finds out, he can do no more than beat me to death." The flatness of her voice robbed the words of their melodrama. Lady Alys obviously had herself well in hand.

Gillian regarded her narrowly. "What does your stepson plan for you that you find flight with a perfect stranger preferable? Surely, there are servants here who are your friends. Would you not be safer traveling with one of them to Calais?"

The lady smoothed an imaginary crease in the lustrous material of her skirt. "I am, as I have said, an Englishwoman. My father was a merchant whose wealth rescued my husband's manor. 'Tis an old story. The very oldest where women are concerned, I suppose. My place in this house was always as an inferior. Never were my

husband's servants my friends. Now they are my guards. My stepson will do as he wills. He is their lord now. They would obey him even if they sympathized with me. Which they do not," she added unhappily.

Gillian was silent. Lady Alys was pale as death. Her eyes, a soft sky blue, were the only color in her face. Still she had not told this terrible fate that she feared so.

Swallowing, the lady raised her eyes heavenward. Her hands twisted the scrap of linen in her lap. "Jules will send me to the Poor Clare nunnery near Amiens. I cannot join the sisterhood. Indeed, I would not want to. But he will not pay for me to enter except as an indentured servant. I cannot leave. The sisters are under a vow of silence. Some choose death in life. To be buried alive in sight of the altar. I cannot . . . I cannot . . ." Her breath came short in her throat. Her heart beat against the confines of her dress so that Gillian actually saw it beating.

Alys's words spoken in such quiet desperation created a cold feeling in the pit of Gillian's stomach. Reared in a world of middle-class men, she knew little of nunneries and monasteries. The control of the Roman Catholic Church in York Minster was strong; all paid their tithe unquestioningly. Yet no one in Gillian's acquaintance had actually chosen the church as a vocation. A few older women sometimes retired behind its walls voluntarily when their husbands died. Gillian's own free life; with choices open to her as if she were a man, made her shudder at the thought of Alys's virtual imprisonment. Nevertheless, she tried to voice an objection. "I suppose you have told your stepson you do not wish to go."

"Of course," Alys sighed hopelessly. "I even volunteered to give up all my dowry if he would only let me

return to England. He refused. He hates me. He feels I influenced his father against him."

"Did you?" Gillian's eyes locked with the older woman's. The crucial question had to be asked and answered truthfully.

Without blinking Alys answered. "Yes. I was young and foolish. I hoped to have sons of my own. I did not know . . . could not have known . . . that Floris was barely able to perform as a husband more than half a dozen times. In the end Jules remained his only heir. He is right to hate me; but, oh, I cannot bear the thoughts of what he plans."

Her confession complete, Alys bowed her head. Gillian drew in a deep breath. What had she stumbled into? She found Alys's story impossible not to believe, especially in the light of the confession of her wrongdoing. For what acts the unfortunate Jules now sought revenge, Gillian could not guess. The rest of the sordid story was unimportant. Could she leave a fellow countrywoman to virtual slavery? Her own life as an independent free-worker had taught her to love freedom.

Still she tried once more. "How can you be sure that your nephew will accept you in England? Perhaps you go from a life of quiet toil in a nunnery to something much worse."

Alys raised her head. "Rather the devil I know than the devil unknown?" She shook her head. "I do not dread the unknown, *mon fils*. I came to France as a young girl. I lived for many years with an old cruel man. He was not hard to influence. He hated his son. If Jules would only admit it, he was better served to live apart from his father. But the Bellepaix men were ever crazed. Once an idea gets into their heads, it remains."



When Gillian still hesitated, Alys struggled to her feet, her voice breaking at last. "I will show you!" she exclaimed, her blue eyes flashing hysterically. Stooping, she pulled up the full skirt of her velvet gown. Above the silk stockings and prettily tied garters encasing her lower limbs, her thighs gleamed white. "See," she whispered. "See what Floris did to me one night shortly after we were married."

Marring the smooth skin was a puckered scar. Faded with the years, it nevertheless was the result of a deep burn. Holding the skirt with one hand, Alys caught up Gillian's wrist. "Feel." She guided the reluctant fingers over the spot. "He branded me with the brand he used for his serfs."

Sick with horror, Gillian had little strength to resist. Alys's hand steadily dragged the stronger girl's fingers over the white indentation almost two inches in diameter. "'Tis very deep," Alys continued. "He held the iron against me a long time while I screamed and twisted. No one can tell what the mark was meant to be."

With an indistinct exclamation of horror, Gillian wrenched her hand away. "Good Lord, milady! How could you endure such as that?"

"A woman endures what she must." Alys dropped her skirt philosophically. "I was younger then. But now I will not suffer at the hands of the son of that sadist. I long so desperately to be free of this house. Oh, please . . ." She clasped her hands. "Please, take me with you."

Gillian closed hers over them. "The way will be hazardous . . . but I will take you."

They were an odd pair, Gillian thought. A tiny lady

dressed in the purloined garments of an elderly manservant, her fair golden hair docked short and whitened with flour and face powder, and herself, a woman dressed in the salt-stained garments of an unknown sailor. Heavy rucksacks on their backs, they nevertheless strode out briskly along the coast road toward Dunkerque.

How long Lady Alys could continue at the pace was questionable, but Gillian intended to push both herself and her charge as fast as possible. Alys had been unsure as to the time Jules would arrive. Anxiously, she had pressed for a departure as swift as possible. The genuine fear in her convinced Gillian as nothing else could have done of the necessity for haste.

Alys did not know that she traveled in the company of another female. The habits of concealment born of so many years made Gillian wary. To her knowledge, no one outside her immediate family except Brian de Trenanay and his nemesis Ranulf knew what she was. The fewer people who knew, the better. Alys would doubtless have more faith in her if she believed her escort to be a youth.

The road was crowded with all sorts of vehicles, mostly heavily laden. At last Gillian spotted an empty one. Grabbing Alys's arm, she pointed. "Ask him politely if he minds us riding with him as far as he is going."

Alys stared at the burly man nodding over the reins. "But . . ."—she sniffed expressively—" . . . he is a fishmonger from somewhere along the coast. He has used his cart to carry fish to market."

"Right. He should be going in the same direction we want to go for a time."

"Why not ask someone else?" Alys looked around hopefully.

"Because no one else has an empty cart." Gillian gave

her a slight shove. "Go on."

While Alys hesitantly approached and bowed low at the cartwheel, Gillian struck a pose at the side of the road. The fishmonger answered readily enough, pointed to the road ahead, then slapped the reins on the horse's back and drove on.

Alys turned back, shrugging her shoulders expressively but not quite meeting Gillian's eyes.

"What did he say?"

"He said we are about fifteen leagues from Calais." Alys picked up her bundle. "We had best walk steadily if we want to get over halfway tonight."

Gillian caught her arm as she bent over. "Why did he not offer us a ride?"

Alys drew a deep breath. "Because I did not ask him for one." At her admission, she flinched away fully expecting a blow. When none was forthcoming, she stared at Gillian. "Why do you not beat me?"

"I am waiting for your reason. Then if it is not a good one, I will beat you."

Alys sighed. "It is not a good one. I hate the smell and sight and taste of fish." She stood with head bowed waiting for Gillian's blow to descend.

Gillian shrugged angrily. "Fifteen leagues is a long walk because you happen to dislike something."

"It makes me violently ill if I have to eat it."

"You are a spoiled fool."

Alys murmured something too low to catch in reply. "I shall walk faster," she promised.

"And carry me on your back," Gillian grumbled.

But Alys was already heading down the road, almost at a trot.

They settled down for the night in a haystack. The surf

sang somewhere to the northwest. The prevailing wind was cool and smelled of salt. Alys happily spread a blanket down for them, then held out her arms.

Gillian stared at her in astonishment. "What? . . ."

Alys smiled shyly. "I fully mean to pay my way," she said softly. "I am old enough to be your mother, 'tis true, but I am experienced in many ways to please men."

Gillian stepped back a couple of paces, shaking her head. "'Tis not necessary," she protested. "Believe me, I will never ask such a sacrifice of any woman." A secret smile played around her lips.

Alys's arms dropped; her mouth quivered. "Is it that I am so much older than you? I know I am past my youth, but I will do anything you ask of me. Floris needed much 'coaxing.' Sometimes he would punish me because he could not." She swallowed hard, her blue eyes luminous with tears of remembered pain. "At length he found that only by causing me pain could he become excited enough to perform the man's part."

Gillian sat down across from her on the blanket. "Believe me, Lady Alys, what you offer is generous, but unnecessary. I will take you to Calais and get you on a boat and thence to England, if luck holds. I will not desert you. You may believe me. I will do all that I say without a reward."

Alys regarded the fletcher steadily. With the tip of her tongue, she moistened her lips. Her hands twisted in her lap. At last she spoke. "I believe you. You are a brave and honest youth. Would you like to make love to me because I can give you pleasure then? Not as payment, but as if I were your lover?" She blushed painfully. "I would like that very much. I have never been loved by anyone but Floris," she admitted.

In that moment Gillian pitied her. Her own experience with Brian had taught her the joy of physical pleasure. The idea of the act of love with anyone but her knight was distasteful in the extreme. Especially distasteful was the picture Alys created of her husband beating and burning her in order to arouse himself. What a horrible experience Alys must have endured!

Should she tell this woman her secret? Her mouth opened to reveal herself, then closed abruptly. She did not entirely trust Alys to do what she was ordered to do. She might betray Gillian if a better opportunity came along.

But how to refuse without betraying herself? Unbidden came the memory of Ranulf and his strange love for men. Carefully Gillian raised her hand to her temple and smoothed her hair back as she had seen him do. "I really cannot help you more, milady." She made her voice light and bored in imitation of Ranulf.

Instantly, Alys's face changed. Her lip curled slightly. "I see," she said. "Forgive me. I did not realize your feelings. You seemed so . . . Forgive me. I am grateful for your escort. I shall not embarrass you with unwanted offers again."

Briskly, she pulled a blanket from Gillian's rucksack and wrapped it around herself. "I must get some sleep," she said huskily as she stretched out with her back to Gillian. "I shall need all my strength to walk to Calais in the morning."

Sadly, Gillian regarded her stiff form. Had she destroyed the camaraderie of the day with her pretense? But how much more would Alys's confidence have been destroyed had she learned she was traveling with another woman!

Gillian, too, rolled herself into her blanket and stretched out in the sweet-scented hay. By the end of the day tomorrow, should all go well, they would arrive in Calais. There her work would begin. She would be responsible for finding them a ship sailing for home. If none were in port, she would have to find rooms at an inn. They had no money, only a few jewels which someone might think they had stolen. Pray God there was a ship leaving immediately.

At the same time she longed to be away, Gillian shuddered at the thought of having to set forth again in a rolling, pitching boat. Once back home in England, she would think twice before taking a ferry across a river.

A farmer with a load of turnips gave them a ride a league from Calais. "You are not sickened by the sight of turnips, are you?" Gillian asked with mock politeness, when Alys started to climb onto the cart's tail.

But Alys groaned with the effort of dragging her weary body up. "I would ride down the road now even if I were heaving over the side of the wagon," she vowed, slumping back against the load. "I swear the soles of my feet are one solid blister."

"Very likely," Gillian agreed. "Mine are no better. I never walked so far in all my life."

Alys lay silent for several minutes as the cart creaked along behind the plodding draft horse. "As a sailor I suppose you have never had to," she said at last. "Is your profession, away from land and women, why you do not care for us?"

"I am not a sailor," Gillian said before she thought.

"No?"

"I was shipwrecked, true enough. But I am a fletcher by trade."

Alys digested this bit of information. "My father was a merchant. 'Tis terrible to be neither wellborn nor lowborn. You are neither up nor down, neither high nor low."

Gillian shook her head. "I did not find it so. I am a member of the Guild of Fletchers and Bowyers. Only the finest craftsmen are allowed in this guild. We are very proud of our profession."

Alys shook her head doubtfully. "Perhaps it is different for a man," she sighed. "For a woman . . . Perhaps if I had been able to do as you have done, I would feel differently about myself. Perhaps the problem is with being born female."

"Perhaps so." Gillian was forced to agree.

Alys yawned widely in the warm sunshine. Her eyelids drooped, then closed. "No wonder you prefer men," she whispered. "Who in his right mind would prefer a woman?"

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

The Calais docks were a confusion of cacophonous sounds, exotic smells, and bizarre sights—not all of them pleasant. Small and large ships from all over the world docked at this English port on the seacoast of France. All the languages of every seafaring country in the world flowed around their heads, but the common language was French. Alys hung on Gillian's sleeve as much as she dared, cowering back because the many exchanges in guttural peculiar accents frightened her.

"Whatever shall we do?" she whispered. "I have never seen so many people." She staggered backward as a duffel bag, swung from the shoulder of a passing sailor, brushed against her.

"Ask about a ship bound for England."

"Ask who?" Alys was close to tears. Blotches reddened on her cheeks due to her effort to restrain herself.



Gillian pulled her into a niche created by barrels and bales piled in front of a warehouse. "Brace up!" she commanded gripping Alys's shoulders and glaring hard into her pale blue eyes. "You must do the talking, unless we find an English ship. Then I will do it."

Alys shook her head despairingly. "I—"

"Think of Jules. Think of the nunnery."

"Perhaps I was wrong. . . ."

Gillian snorted her disgust. "A fine time to think that. Listen, Alys, if you burst into tears like a woman, I will slap you. You are dressed like a man. Act like one."

Alys sniffed, shaking her head slightly.

"You can do it. Remember to keep your voice trembly like your old husband's." She caught Alys's chin and lifted it. "Of course . . . Be your old husband. How would Floris behave? Think of yourself as Floris."

Alys stared into the intense face stooping to her level. "Like Floris?" she whispered. "Like Floris." She blinked, then drew a deep breath. She looked past Gillian's shoulder. "Shall we try that ship first?" Her voice had dropped at least four notes. With a peculiar limping gait she swaggered across the dock to the gangplank of a small barge.

With a smile of relief Gillian followed her. The persistence that Alys had displayed in getting Gillian to take her this far would go a long way. Once Alys set her mind, she was as determined as the Bellepaix men who would not change.

Some vessels had just docked; others loaded cargo preparing for departure. "Ask at those first," Gillian advised as Alys came down the third gangplank shaking her head.

They walked along noting ships taking on cargo, and inquiring at those first. The morning passed swiftly.

Those vessels bound for England seemed, one and all, to have full crews. One mate offered to take Gillian, but refused to take Alys, who, to Gillian's disgust, had overplayed her part as an old man.

Tired and hungry, they sat on a couple of barrels staring at the gray water and the ships floating at anchor in the harbor. "Somewhere out there is the ship for us," Gillian insisted.

Alys's stomach rumbled. "If we find it before we starve to death."

"We will. We have not really tried very long. You are doing so well," she added truthfully to the older woman.

The compliment braced Alys. "Forward," she murmured with a dry smile.

At the end of a long dock a short man directed the unloading of a pair of horses. Gillian stared at his back. Somehow he looked vaguely familiar. As the sling lowered the big destrier to the boards, the animal lost its footing and went down on its knees.

A string of oaths leaped from the man's mouth as he sprang to the horse's head. Although the language was French, the voice, too, seemed familiar.

"Try here," Gillian suggested.

"But they are unloading," Alys protested.

"Yes, I know. . . ." Gillian stopped in mid sentence.

A tall man with massive shoulders strode down the gangplank. His cloak blew around him; his sandy hair tossed in the wind. Even at a distance his features were marked by deep grooves around the mouth and between the eyebrows.

"Brian," she whispered. "Brian. I am dreaming." Stumbling slightly, she started forward. The dock seemed endless. Expecting him to disappear at any moment or to

become someone else as she came closer, she walked slowly at first almost hesitating. It could not be he. Not here in France. Not arriving on this dock on the day she needed him most. His presence was the stuff of magic and of wishes.

Flinging his cloak back, he strode toward the destrier adding his voice to the smaller man's. Together they hauled the horse to its feet.

She was halfway, her steps hurrying. She could vaguely hear Alys behind her calling her name inquiringly. At the sound of her name, the big man turned.

A look of incredulous gladness lighted his stern features. He dropped the horse's bridle and bolted toward her. "Gillian!"

She flung herself against him throwing her arms around his body, crying and laughing at the same time. "Brian! Brian! Oh, dear God, Brian. I have been so afraid. . . ."

"When I found Ranulf had taken you captive . . ." Leaving his sentence unfinished, he bent his head and kissed her full on the mouth, his tongue burrowing into her as if to assure himself of her reality. His arms clasped her so hard against him that she could not breathe. His prodigious strength was cracking her ribs, yet she did not care. His big palms roved up and down her slender body pressing her tightly against him as he reassured himself.

"Gillian." He gasped her name against her mouth. "Gillian! Oh, I feared . . . Oh . . ." He flung his head back, his eyes heavenward in an attitude of silent thanksgiving. His right hand cupped the back of her head pressing her face against his chest. She could feel his heart pounding beneath her cheek.

"Ah, Brian . . ." Her eyes brimmed with tears of joy. He was holding her; she was safe in his arms. He felt so good. Smiling she tilted her head back to be greeted by another impassioned kiss delivered accompanied by a joyous laugh.

This time the kiss lasted longer. His lips turned tender; his tongue, caressing. She could feel a new hardness to his body as her own began to tingle. A languor began to invade her, a melting softening that caused her to lean impossibly closer to him.

All around them the workers on the dock stared, their faces registering every emotion from utter shock to frank outrage.

At last the two pulled apart, breathless, their eyes smoldering with desire. From far off Hob spoke. "Thank God you are safe, *Gil*." He emphasized her name drawing them partially back to reality.

Brian stepped back grinning. "Are you really all right?" He surveyed her critically, taking in the strange clothing, salt-stained and much the worse for constant wear. "You are thinner." Unable to keep his hands off her, he ran them over her ribs, pressing meaningfully. A dockhand dropped the end of the bale he was carrying to stare in open-mouthed astonishment.

"You too," she acknowledged, taking in the harsh lines around his mouth and the sunken hollows of his cheeks.

"I was frantic, *chérie*," he admitted softly.

"Who is your companion?" Hob asked, breaking in again and drawing Brian's attention.

Suddenly conscious of the cold, speculative looks of men on the dock, Brian set her gently from him. Over her shoulder he saw a little old man dressed in the livery of a

servant, a hat shading his face against the glare.

At the same time, Gillian swung away from Brian's embrace and motioned to Hob to come forward. Affectionately, she shook his hand and patted him on the shoulder. His blue eyes gleaming, he drew her in against him. "'Tis good to see you safe, mistress," he rasped in her ear.

Startled, she pulled back.

"Brian told me," he grinned. "When we found the oxen tied outside Harry Bailey's, he went mad. In his ravings he revealed all about you."

She shrugged. "Ah, well, since Ranulf knows, you might as well too." Gillian felt Brian's arm around her waist. Looking up at him, her joy in her eyes, she slid her hand into his and leaned her head against his shoulder. "I have missed you both." She drew a deep breath.

"'Tis obvious you missed Sir Brian more than I," Hob teased.

"Certainly," Brian grinned. His fingers squeezed her waist.

"M-Master Gil," Alys stammered shyly.

The three broke apart self-consciously, like children whose secret club must be protected against intruders at all costs.

Brian eyed the little old man suspiciously; but almost at first glance, Hob's face broke into a grin. "Who might this be?" His voice was light and warm.

Gillian smiled gently at Alys. "Brian. Hob." She motioned to her traveling companion to come forward. "This is Alys."

Hob's grin broadened. He thrust forth his hand in manly style. "My pleasure, *m'sieur*."

Alys smiled warily as she placed her small hand in his.

"These are friends of yours, Gil?" she questioned anxiously.

"Oh, yes," Gillian replied, looking fondly from knight to squire. "The best of friends."

An awkward silence followed as Alys stared aghast at the person she believed to be a slender youth locked in the embrace of one tall man while she held the arm of another. At last she swallowed gamely. "Well, I think that is lovely. To meet one's friends so surprisingly. How well . . . met. . . ." She trailed away. "I—"

"What has happened to you?" Brian asked.

"The story is too long to tell standing on the dock-side." Gillian smiled. "Neither Alys nor I have any money. Nor have we eaten all day. I know my lady is faint from weakness."

Hob sprang forward gallantly to offer his arm to Alys. One old sailor on the dock spat disgustedly as he loosened the sling from around the destrier's belly. Hob looked uneasily around him and dropped his arm embarrassed.

Brian chuckled. "Join the group, Hob."

Alys's face turned beet red. "I am a woman," she hissed at Brian.

"But they do not know you are." He raised one cynical eyebrow. "What does that make all of us?"

"We had best find an inn some distance from here." Hob glanced around him hurriedly. Most men were stolidly ignoring the scene, but a few muttered and growled among themselves, pointing and sneering.

"I will take Gil and his companion to *La Reine d'Or*," Brian said decisively. "Follow with the horses and gear as soon as you can. I shall secure rooms for all of us."

The squire touched his hat. "I shall hurry," he smiled, his eyes on Alys, who returned his smile hesitantly.

"Best order a full meal to be served immediately. They both look nigh done."

Gillian smiled thankfully at Hob, while Brian growled, "I can take care of them without any advice from you. Give me credit for knowledge of the courtesies due a lady."

Motioning them both to accompany him, he led the way muttering as he went.

"Still at odds with Hob," Gil observed sadly as she strode along beside him and Alys trotted along bringing up the rear.

Brian slowed his pace. "Not at all," he denied. "He practically saved my life. Only Hob thinks I have no common sense."

Gil shot him a teasing glance from under raised eyebrows.

Brian squared his jaw stubbornly. "*La Reine d'Or* is just ahead. We can continue this conversation over supper."

Ordering with a lavish hand, Brian bade Hob open a bottle of wine. "Ah, *chérie*"—he smiled at Gillian—"at last I can treat you to some of the delicate wines of my country. The stuff that the English import is poor stuff by comparison."

He had seated her within reach of his right hand, his knee pressing against her thigh under the table. If he thought about how they must appear to Alys, he chose to disregard appearances.

The nearness of him stirred Gillian's senses almost unbearably. The sight of his dear face, his green-flecked gold eyes, his strong jaw filled her vision. The intimate

warmth of his knee sent tremors of weakness into the center of her body. When he offered her the goblet of wine, she deliberately caressed his fingers where they grasped the bowl.

Hob seated himself across from Brian with Alys on his right. He grinned at the sight of the knight, once so imbued with the inherent snobbishness of the knightly kind toward the middle-class craftsmen. The man could not take his eyes off his little fletcher, while she gazed at him with her heart in her luminous eyes, her lips trembling as he spoke to her.

With a twinge of loneliness the squire turned to the lady on his right. Late thirties, he judged her to be by the tiny wrinkles around her eyes. Her hands were soft and white as befitted a lady, her figure in the men's garments shapely. He doubted very much if she had borne children, since the results were usually readily evident in sagging breasts and bulging belly.

Flushing under his scrutiny, she concentrated on her meal. "Oh, I do appreciate this," she remarked to the table in general as she reached for the wine. "I was desperately hungry. Several times when I went on board a vessel to inquire about passage, I would smell food cooking in the galley. Even fish was beginning to smell good." She smiled apologetically at Gil.

"Fish makes Alys ill," Gillian explained. "She refused to ask a carter for a ride yesterday because he had been hauling fish in his cart."

Brian's face grew grave. "How far did you have to come?"

"From Montchambeau," Alys supplied. "A distance of some twenty leagues."

"No wonder you are both tired," Hob observed sym-



pathetically. "How long did the journey take?"

"Two and a half days," Gillian said. "We ran out of food yesterday."

"I have some jewelry, but Gil would not let me try to sell it." Alys turned to Hob. "Perhaps you would sell it for me?" she asked. "Then I could pay for my passage back to England."

"I was afraid that someone might think we had stolen it and ask too many questions. I would have risked it today, if we had not found you." Gillian shivered slightly at the comforting pressure of Brian's knee under the table.

"You must not wander away on your own again," he said sternly.

Gil turned on him indignantly. "I did not wander away. I rose early and delivered the commission to the depot. On the way back I was waylaid by Ranulf and made a prisoner. I was returning to the Tabard."

"You should not have gone without escort," Brian argued. "Both Hob and I would have risen shortly and accompanied you."

"The last words between the two of you the night before bespoke a more serious business the morning after." Gillian reminded him of his drunken challenge.

Swallowing his wine hastily, Hob leaped into the conversation. "What happened to you after Wat threw you into the hold of the boat?"

Gillian smiled grimly. "Ranulf told me that the captain of the vessel was to throw me overboard when she was in the middle of the channel." Brian cursed angrily. "So I worked myself free, determined to hide somewhere on board. A great storm blew up and drove us before it to the French coast. Evidently some poor sailor new to the ship

was washed overboard in it. In all the confusion and fear, I was mistaken for him. They fed me and gave me his hammock and clothes." She plucked at the filthy garments.

"They set me to watch for the coastline, but I was distracted and they ran aground. I jumped overboard and made the shore. When last I saw them, they were trying to get free from the sand bar."

Hob looked amazed. "Wat said he threw you in the hold of the *Maudelayne*. Did he really do so, or did he lie?"

Gillian shook her head. "I really do not know the name of the ship. I suppose . . . oh, yes, I remember. The cook told me her name. It was the *Maudelayne*."

Hob sat back regarding her with awe. "You escaped one of the terrors of the channel," he declared. "A tall man with a grizzled beard that bristled in every direction on his face."

"Yes."

"He is a pirate and a thief. Dangerous. Whenever he takes a ship, he throws his captives overboard. He would have done just as Ranulf commanded him."

Gillian shuddered.

Brian shook his head, his hand closed over her own. "Think no more about it," he advised. "You are safe. But do not leave my side again."

"No," she whispered.

"How long was it before you appeared in my apple tree?" Alys asked to break the awkward silence.

"Oh, about a day. I was very hungry. Your hound attacked me without warning. I barely made the lower limb with my life." Gillian grinned in mock terror.

"You were like an angel to me." Alys smiled warmly.

"So young and golden and speaking the first English I had heard in many a long year. I could scarcely believe my ears."

"Nor I," Gillian agreed. "I must learn some French." She turned to Brian.

"I mean that you should." His eyes regarded her warmly, stripping the coarse garments and imagining her naked while he taught her the parts of her body.

"We came to find you," Hob told her. "Ranulf had left clues to lead us on a chase all over the south side of the Thames, but we found him sooner than he expected."

"Obviously, you were successful," Gillian complimented them. "You arrived in Calais very quickly."

"He tried some nasty tricks, drugging Brian and sending me to be killed by Wat, but we were able to get out of his trap and come after you. Although," the squire added quietly, "I frankly never expected to see you again. Ranulf would never have allowed you to live."

Gillian stared into the wine in her goblet. "I cannot think why the man bears me such enmity. I did not harm him. I did not even do permanent harm to Wat's cousin when I shot him."

Brian drew a deep breath. "Ah, but you did best him," he reminded her. "Alone, you with your little feathered sticks held him and his retinue captive. You freed me and robbed him of his pleasure. Most important you embarrassed him, made him lose face with his men. And the reason he will not tolerate that is well known to you if you will only think on it a minute."

Soberly she nodded. "I only sought to rescue you."

Brian drained the last of the wine. The meal had been a long one, for the candles were nigh to guttering in the candelabra. Alys was drooping, her elbow on the table,

her palm supporting her cheek. "'Tis time to retire. We have two rooms at our disposal. Gil and I will take the inner room. Hob, summon the manservant to make up beds in here for you two."

"Lady Alys may not care to sleep in the same room with me," Hob reminded the knight who even now was guiding an exhausted Gillian to her feet.

"Oh, no," Alys sat up startled and straight. "Oh, I will be fine anywhere. I do not want to be a burden. Just a pallet on the floor. I have spent the night with Gil these past two days. I trust his friends equally." She looked from one to the other, her blue eyes resigned.

Hob hid a smile behind his hand. Alys obviously believed them all to prefer men to women. For himself he would enjoy disproving that belief. However, tonight when she was so exhausted was not the time. "We shall do very well in separate beds in the same room," he declared.

"Good night," Gil mumbled as Brian led her into the bedchamber. His hands were already caressing her as the door closed behind them.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

As if mighty forces had thrown them together, Gillian and Brian clasped each other's bodies. His mouth came down on hers, sealing them in all ways but one as their hands clutched and their arms strained. The only sound in the still room was their labored breathing followed by the faint whimper of protest Gillian made when his strength became too much for her slender body to bear.

At the sound Brian reluctantly raised his head and loosened his grip, allowing her to draw in a shuddering breath. "Forgive me, *chérie*," he murmured. "I could not get enough of you."

"'Tis the same with me," she whispered. "I ached to hold you. I could not get you close enough."

He kissed her again, less violently, but not less emotionally. "First to get you out of these rags," he told her, lifting the bottom of the sailor's smock and tugging it off

over her head. Her comments were muffled in the enveloping material. "Ah, beautiful," he grinned as he tossed the smock over his shoulder and cupped her breasts. His thumbs circled her nipples as she moaned with pleasure.

"You . . . you . . ." she protested softly.

"Yes, sweetheart," he agreed, kissing each in turn.

"Me . . . me . . ."

The drawstring holding up the coarse, gathered pantaloons yielded to his questing fingers. Efficiently, he peeled the rough, salt-stiffened garments, along with the hose under them, down around her knees. There he knelt to pull her boots off.

On his knees before her, his eyes swept up her naked body, swaying slightly in the firestorm of her passion. With a fierce exclamation, he clasped his hands over her buttocks and drew her body toward his mouth.

Embarrassed, she pushed against his shoulders, but he would not be denied. Exultantly, he pressed a kiss against the nest of pale curls at the jointure of her thighs. She moaned as the intimacy of his act shook her uncontrollably. Then with her body shuddering beneath his mouth, he brushed his beard back and forth across her lower belly.

"Oh, God, Brian . . . Oh, no . . . please . . . pl-please . . ." she babbled hysterically. Tiny giggles of laughter burst from her throat as she gripped his hair and pulled back. But when he complied, allowing his head to drop away, she drew him toward her.

"A woman can never make up her mind." He chuckled. His tongue traced fantastic patterns from her navel to her groin. Weakly she collapsed, able only to fall back limply as his hands on her buttocks supported her

gently to the floor.

In mock irritation he rose straddling her. "What am I going to do with you?" he growled. "No stamina. No strength. A man loves you and you just pass out on him—on the floor."

"Yes, Brian," she whispered, her eyes half closed as she took sweet revenge for his criticism. Watchful of his reaction, she allowed one hand to stray to her breast where her thumb and forefinger gently pinched her nipple.

The movement drew a sharp intake of breath from him. Swiftly, he tore off his clothing, careless of any damage he might do. As he stood aside to strip off his hose, her other hand strayed down over her belly to twine her fingers in the tangled curls.

"Witch!" he gasped feverishly as his naked manhood hardened even more at the sight of her deliberate abandon.

She laughed. A shivery throaty laugh. All woman, all temptress, she arched upward, lifting her swollen breasts to him.

With an unintelligible cry he dropped down, parting her thighs roughly. Iron-hard, he positioned himself against her glistening opening. "I cannot . . ." He drove into her without finishing his sentence.

She cried out, a high shriek of pained pleasure, and clasped him to her, with the hot velvet walls of her sheath as well as her arms and thighs and mouth. They were as one, sealed to each other.

A trembling began within her as she felt his throbbing hardness against the mouth of her womb. The vibration caressed his shaft, stimulating it. Sweat beaded his body as he groaned in virtual agony at the sweet torment.

Every atom of his manhood screamed at him to move, to thrust, to relieve himself of this awful building pressure. Yet the experience was too sweet to forsake. Grimly, he hung on, his hands flexing, his fingers bruising her spine and digging into her buttocks.

The sounds of his breathing hummed in her ears as did the drumming of her own blood. Every tremor that began in the pit of her stomach drove lightning along her nerves to every part of her body. Her tongue explored the interior of his groaning mouth, tasting him and lapping up the sweet nectar of him. Her turgid nipples aching unbearably, she sought relief instinctively by rubbing them against the blond mat on his chest.

"Gillian! Oh, God!"

He must come closer, he must come . . . Responding to desires she did not know she possessed, she drove her fingernails into the heavy muscles across his shoulder blades. The pain drove him harder into her. In his ecstasy he ground against the throbbing core of her womanhood between her thighs.

His was the final movement. An explosion of feeling burst from that point to roll in powerful waves throughout her body. So intense was its lightning that she seemed to leave the floor, clasping herself to him impossibly tighter.

"Gillian! Oh, love!"

His throbbing sword was helpless in her grip. Wave after wave of sweet motions rippled around him, gripping and releasing so powerfully that he could contain himself no longer. He, too, exploded; his body splintering into a thousand tiny shards, each one a separate atom of pleasure. In his ecstasy, he shouted his love into her gasping mouth.



For an interminable time neither of them moved. Finally, feeling a need for air in her lungs which labored under Brian's considerable weight, Gillian stirred weakly.

"Am I too heavy?" he moaned softly.

"Of course," she whispered. "How can you doubt it?"

"But you are so soft and comfortable," he protested, lifting himself on hands and knees and sliding limply aside to sprawl on the floor.

A disgusted mutter was her only reply.

Both lay side by side with hands limply clasped, staring at the brown vacancy of the ceiling. At last she stirred.

"Is there a bed?" she whispered.

"Somewhere over there," he murmured.

"A long way away?"

"Um-hum. A *very* long way away."

She lay silent for a few moments. "You are the knight," she said at last. "Are you not supposed to bear me away somewhere, say to a bower, or at least a bed?"

"Only before I ravish you," he sighed. "Not after."

She sat up dizzily, pressing her face into her hands. "Missed my chance again."

"We have the whole night before us. I promise to do better next time."

She rubbed her elbow, then shifted slightly onto one hip. "I think I have a splinter."

"Probably several." He rolled over on his side, pillowing his cheek on his bent arm. Appreciatively, he studied her naked form. "Hopefully in some very interesting places. It will be my duty as a knight to render aid to you, my lady, and help to alleviate your suffering." He leered suggestively at the white curve of the buttock she displayed.

She raised her eyebrows haughtily. "I can find my own splinters."

"'Twill be more fun if you let me help you." He smiled.

She raised a hand to her forehead as if shading her eyes to look into the far distance. "I think I see the bed over there in the shadows."

He reared up on one elbow. "By God, you are right. It is a bed," he agreed.

She looked at him expectantly. "I can make it if you can."

"Done!" Lazily, he climbed to his feet, stretching unashamedly in front of her. The sight of his nude body viewed at her leisure excited her again. He was so beautiful. Like a sculptor's rendering of a perfect male body except for the pale scars that here and there laced his skin.

Lithe as a cat, she sprang; her hands clutched his thighs. As he gasped in surprise, she fastened her mouth on the tender flesh of the inside of his thigh. Her tongue licked him, tasting the salt on his skin. Inhaling deeply, she smelled the stirring masculinity of him.

"Oh, God, Gillian . . . Please . . . not . . . Aahh!"

Obeying desires older than mankind, she touched her lips to the tip of his manhood. Instantly, the muscle stiffened jumping against her mouth as a tormented groan burst from him. Her fingernails dug into his suddenly taut buttocks as she held him firmly and closed her mouth around him.

"Woman!" he cried, bowing his head as shudder after shudder of delight poured over him.

She pulled back her head. "Yes?" She smiled seductively.

With a fervent oath he clutched her shoulders and hauled her to her feet. Accustomed ever, by virtue of his size and strength, to take the lead in lovemaking, the intensity of emotion aroused by this small girl, combined with the force of his own arousal angered him. "You go too far!" he grated.

Dragged against him so her body touched his from loins to breasts, she allowed her head to loll back on her shoulders. Perhaps she should have been afraid. She had shocked him with her ardor, yet she could not fear him. Smiling lazily into the face of his irritation, she dared to tease him. "*Now* will you bear me away to the bed and ravish me?"

"Damn!"

He swept her high on his chest and bore her where she asked with swift steps. Almost flinging her onto the coverlet, he followed her down and buried his face between her breasts.

They lay for a long time. His hands clasped her waist tightly while her fingers trailed ever and ever through his hair.

At last he sighed. "I want you again," he whispered. "My body is beginning to ache as if I never had you."

She shifted slightly, arching her back and digging her heels into the soft mattress. "Do you?"

"Yes." He kissed her breast closing his lips over her nipple and tonguing it gently.

She moaned softly. Her stroking never ceased, but her fingers trembled.

"May I have you?"

"Why not let me make love to you?"

When he did not reply, she lay in breathless silence, fearful that she might have angered him again. At last he

sighed deeply. "Whatever would please you." He rolled away from her onto his back.

Galvanized with excitement, she sat up. Her eyes moved down the length of his body. He lay quiescent, his arms at his sides, hands lying limply with palms turned upward. Only a tightness about his mouth betrayed the restraint he had placed on himself. That and the fact that his eyes glowed like green flames in his suddenly pale face.

Hesitantly, trembling, she slid her hands up along the flat plains of his chest. The soft blond hairs curled around her fingers. Beneath her palms his tiny male nipples hardened and rasped against her skin. Sensing she had found a sensitive spot, she swept her hands in small tight circles, finally, ending with her thumbs caressing him. When a tiny moan escaped him, her eyes flew to his face studying it as he half-closed his eyes and caught his lower lip between his teeth.

A quivering began in her belly as she recognized the same signs in him that she had felt in herself. Feeling strangely powerful, she bent to catch one of the tiny nubs of taut flesh between her teeth. Nipping lightly at first, she immediately kissed him with the next breath. Her lips and tongue laved the flesh she had punished the instant before.

Beneath her mouth Brian moaned again, this time accompanying the sound by a convulsive closing of his hands into tight fists.

Smiling, she repeated her attention to his other nipple. This time his chest arched slightly before she had finished.

Dimly surprised at her own inventiveness and daring, she rose above him and straddled him. His eyes flew open

as she settled herself so her soft moist nest brushed the hard bulging maleness at the joining of his thighs.

Leaning forward, her belly and breasts resting against his counterparts, she began to kiss him, running her tongue into the sensitive satin interior of his mouth, touching his teeth and tongue. At the same time her hands fondled his nipples, pinching and caressing them, treating him to tiny stabs of pain followed by infinite gentleness.

His fist clenched in the coverlet, pulling it as he sought to restrain his desire. His breath was a series of raw gasps as he bucked his hips upward to meet her. As she rode him, she twisted her body from side to side and up and down adding immeasurably to his pleasure as her own body began to glow with moisture from the heat of her exertions.

He spoke into her mouth. "Ah . . . please . . . I cannot . . ."

Sitting up straight, she raised herself and guided his throbbing stiffness into her sheath. As she slid down upon him, twisting her hips as she did so, he was unable to completely choke back a cry of unalloyed pleasure. Now her hands slid forward across his flat belly upward across his ribs to cover his chest. Her fingers found his nipples tormenting them while her palms gave her leverage to move up and down on his staff. With each stroke she grew more confident and less afraid. What she did felt so right.

For Brian, her love-making carried him into a sphere of pleasure he had never conceived. He had had his share of ladies of the court, but none had ever even . . . Beyond the earth-shattering pleasure was the helpless feeling of bewilderment. A woman should not . . . Of course, she

had spent a great deal of her life as a man. . . . A knight should . . . A lady should . . . But . . . "Aaaaahhh!"

A primeval scream burst from his lips. His heels dug deeply into the mattress lifting them both off the bed, thrusting his exploding manhood higher into her than she had ever imagined possible.

Her own cry of painful ecstasy exploded as she was tossed wildly to her own climax.

Almost weightless, their bodies floated back to earth, perspiring limbs entwined. Breast to breast, they lay, her face pressed into the column of his neck. When he softened and slipped from her, she sighed in the drowsy half-world of pleasurable exhaustion.

For a time they slept thus. First one and then the other would wake to be assured of the beloved's presence. A few moist kisses delivered to the portion of skin closest to the lips, a tightening of the arms, and then sleep would close over them again.

As the first rays of dawn slid through the lead panes, Brian opened his eyes. His lips touched Gillian's forehead and she stirred slightly.

"Love?" she whispered.

"Yes." He kissed her again. His hand stroked her tangled ringlets. "We must never be separated again," he said at last.

"No," she agreed dreamily.

"Do you know why?" he continued.

"Because you love me too much?"

"That too." She felt him nod against her hair. "But mainly because we would kill each other the next time we came together after a long parting. I, for one, would not survive the encounter."

She chuckled throatily. "I thought you enjoyed it."

She laughed. "You seemed to be enjoying it at the time."

He slapped her buttocks affectionately. "Wrong," he whispered. "I almost died. The agony was unbearable. Only a knight could have endured the pain. Did you not hear my moans?"

"I did indeed," she agreed. "I shall never, never treat you so cruelly again. And this I swear." She sat upright, placing her hand ceremoniously across her naked breast and bowing her head.

"Perhaps I spoke hastily." He smiled, drinking his fill of the sight of her silken skin in the pearly light. "Actually, I would like you to do that often. The experience gives me a chance to toughen myself."

"I will toughen you," she vowed, punching him gently in the stomach. "Tell the truth, Brian de Trenanay. You loved every minute."

"I loved every minute." He chuckled, dragging her down and kissing her soundly.

They lay together silent for several minutes.

"Brian?"

"Umm?"

"Would you tell me something if I asked you?"

"If I know the answer, I will tell you."

She swallowed hard in embarrassment. "How could Ranulf . . . how could he . . . you know? . . ."

He drew a deep breath. "You mean how could he make love to another man as I have made love to you?"

"Yes . . . and why would he want to?"

"Many men have needs which they feel they must satisfy even when they are in company for long periods of time with other men. Some men do so, but they never have the taste for it. Others find they prefer other men to women."

"I can understand that."

"Furthermore, some men are so brutal or so ugly that women find them repulsive. They, too, turn to other men, who may be stronger and more able to bear their brutality."

"Alys told me her husband beat her so that he might become excited enough to use her. He branded her too." Gillian hid her face against Brian's neck. "Can you imagine anything so hideous?"

Brian's arms tightened around her. "Poor gentle lady," he agreed. "I have heard of such and more."

She pressed a kiss against the pulse beat at the base of his throat. "I could not believe, would not believe until she showed me."

"You are a gently reared girl. Innocent as a baby. 'Twas a bad day for you when Tobin became ill." He stroked her shoulder reassuringly.

She shuddered. Still the question plagued her. "But how could a man make love to another man?"

"When you took me into your mouth," Brian reminded her, "'twas more than pleasant."

"Oh . . ."

"Yes, oh."

Still hideous thoughts would not disappear. "When Ranulf held me captive," she whispered, "he threw me down on the bed on my stomach. And then he straddled me." Her voice quavered at the memory that had haunted her midnight hours.

Brian kissed her forehead. "Tell me, sweet. Did he hurt you badly?"

She shook her head bitterly. "Only the terrible pain in my wrists where he bound me, but something else happened. He cried out while he was on top of me. I am



sure he . . .” She could not go on. Her embarrassment was too great.

“Were you naked?”

“No . . .” Gillian’s voice was outraged. “I would have died. No one has ever seen me naked except you.”

Brian took a deep breath. She wanted to know. The knowledge might help her guard herself sometime. His voice deepened. “If you had been naked, he would have hurt you badly.” Her hands clutched him. “He would have used an opening other than the natural one created for our pleasure.”

She was silent, the brutal physical aspects gradually dawning in her innocent mind. Suddenly, she began to shudder. “Oh, God. How hideous! How revolting!” She clutched him tightly.

“Put it from your mind,” he commanded her. “You wanted to know. Now you know. But you should not dwell on it. It can have no meaning to you.” He put his hands on either side of her head and raised her face from his chest. “Kiss me,” he ordered. “I will make the horror go away.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

"I must be away as soon as possible," Lady Alys announced at breakfast. "I am nervous every moment I remain on French soil. Even now Jules will have set servants to find me."

"You need have no fear, milady." Brian tried to reassure her. "You are under my care. Besides, surely your stepson can have little idea where to find you."

"He knew of my deep desire to return to England." Alys's voice trembled with fear. "The servants will tell of the youth who spoke the language only I could understand. They will tell that the livery is missing. He will be on his way." She clasped her hands tightly in her lap. Her face was very pale.

"Surely you are overfearful?" Hob's voice was gentle with concern.

"I have many reasons to fear for myself," Alys

insisted, "and almost as many to fear for you. He is implacable in his hatreds. He hates me. I know he plans to drag me off to the living death of the nunnery. What is more, if he finds me with you and knows you aided me, he might kill you and say you were abducting me."

The two men looked at each other skeptically. A woman frequently exaggerated things for effect. In all likelihood her stepson would be delighted to return home and find her gone. His attitude would be good riddance since her disappearance saved him the trouble of disposing of her properly. To their way of thinking the nunnery was the only place for her.

"We shall see to the booking of your passage immediately." Brian nodded to Hob, who shrugged agreement.

The four sat at table in the outer room where Brian had bespoken their breakfast. Gillian stared at Alys in concern. In her own mind she had begun to doubt the strength of Alys's will. Perhaps a life of quiet contemplation might not be so bad. "Are you really, really sure that England is where you want to go, Alys? After all, you have not been there in many years."

"Not since I was a girl," Alys admitted, her eyes downcast.

"Are you sure there will be something to go home to?"

"I have a nephew who is a merchant as his father and my father were before him. He is the male relation closest to me in blood." She sighed pathetically. "I am his duty."

Tears of pity misted Gillian's eyes. The injustice of Alys's situation, coupled with the precariousness of it, disturbed her deeply. Being reared to be a cosseted and cared-for possession of men seemed fine until the possession was no longer desired. What of the possession when it was cast aside? A garment, a weapon, a tool had

no feelings, but a woman was capable of great depths of emotion. The inherent cruelty of every man who had ever known Alys was obvious.

Hob cleared his throat. "Can he reclaim some of your dowry, milady?"

Alys stirred uncertainly. "I doubt it. Bellepaix was in a precarious position, else Floris would never have married me. I am sure the bulk went into rebuilding and refurbishing within a few months of our marriage."

Again there was silence at the table.

At last Alys drew her slender purse from inside the servant's shirt. Gravely, she handed it to Sir Brian. "Will you see to the sale of these items, milord? You may be sure the jewelry is mine to sell. I beg you to get the very best price you can. It must pay my passage to Southampton and provide some means of transport to my nephew's house."

Brian weighed the pittance in his hand. Even if the items enclosed were solid gold, their value would be nominal. He doubted very seriously if Alys had enough there to pay for passage to Dover. He tossed the purse to Hob, who weighed it similarly. The two exchanged meaningful glances.

During this exchange Gillian gathered her courage. Although the thought of leaving him tore her heart, she must return. "We were both seeking passage," she reminded them timidly.

Brian frowned at her. "You need not be concerned about your own passage. After all, in a way 'twas my fault you are here to begin with. When the time comes for you to return, I will arrange everything. But surely you do not mean to leave France before you have seen some of its beauty?"

Her eyes misted with tears, Gillian nodded solemnly. "I must. I have been away for so long. My business will not take care of itself. I do not know whether Uncle Tobin is alive or dead. Kenneth might be all alone in York trying to maintain the family trade by himself."

At the mention of her business, Brian's face darkened. Gilliam remembered that he did not care for Tobin Walton. "The money for the commission should have reached them by now," he pointed out coldly. "No. I wish to talk to you very seriously before you make any decision about returning to York."

"Perhaps Alys and I should take the purse and see about her passage?" Hob suggested hastily, sensing the tension in the air. He knew well Brian's stubborn unbending nature, but Gillian had proved herself a very independent lady. The vicinity of these two for the next few minutes would not be pleasant.

"Oh, yes," Alys agreed eagerly, sliding out of her chair and adjusting her smock. "I shall feel every confidence if you make all the arrangements, milord."

Hob held the door for her. "I am not a lord, milady. I am just an humble squire."

She smiled at him, her eyes meeting his as she passed through. "And I was only milady by marriage. Since the marriage is over, I am just a humble widow."

As the door closed behind them, Gillian raised her mouth to receive Brian's kiss. When it came, warm and tender, her heart beat faster with love.

When it was over, his hands caressed her shoulders as he drew her to her feet. "You must remain with me."

She took a deep breath. "Surely you must see that I cannot." Her voice was low, almost a whisper as she hid her face against his throat.

For a long moment, he did not answer. His body was stiff against hers. At last he spoke in a voice harsher than usual. "I see nothing of the kind. You are the woman I love. I will dress you in women's clothing and take you to my home outside Amiens. My mother will meet you and welcome you."

"To what?"

"Why to our family."

Leaning back in his arms, she stared up at him. "I do not even speak your language. What would I do in a French family?"

He gave a sigh of impatience. "She would instruct you in the household arts. You could learn the language quickly. I have some money and a small portion of land."

"What about *my* arts?"

He laughed softly as he smoothed her hair. "You can put aside the sticks and feathers forever, love. You can let your beautiful hair grow long so that I may wind it round your white throat."

His laugh was like a knife driven into the pit of her stomach. "Then I am to become your possession?"

"My wife," he corrected her. "You will be my wife and the mother of my children." His voice was so tender. His green-flecked eyes caressed her everywhere as he bent to kiss her again.

She swallowed hard. Only one chance remained in this tangle. Gently, she extricated herself from his arms and stepped back. When he would have followed her, she held up her hands. "Wait," she commanded him. "Wait right there. I cannot think clearly when you are kissing me."

His eyes were soft with love. "That is as it should be."

"Wait," she begged him again. "Listen. Can I not

be both?"

"Wife and mother, assuredly."

"No. Wife and fletcher?"

He stared at her, his face mirroring changes of emotion. Incredulity. Amusement. Recognition. Disbelief. "N-no . . ." he stammered. At last he smiled uncertainly. "But why should you want to? I will take care of you from now on. You need never work again."

Gillian pulled him down on the bench where Hob had slept. "Does your mother work?" she asked.

Brian thought a minute. "Of course. She works all day long, sewing, embroidering, seeing to the household, managing the servants."

"So you would expect me to work at those tasks?"

He nodded, pleased that she grasped the situation so quickly. "Those tasks are woman's work."

"But I do not wish to do those tasks. A good woman could be hired to do those. Alys, for example. We could let her come to us. She could take care of the house, and I . . ."—she paused to draw a deep breath—" . . . I could continue fletching."

Had she suddenly grown two heads, he could not have stared at her harder. At last he shook his head. "This cannot be."

"Why not? Why can I not choose the work I prefer to do rather than the work that would be boring and onerous to me? Some provision could be made for me to sell my work through Tobin. I could not take the fletcher's chair in the hall, but I would not mind so badly giving it up to be your wife." Her jaw tightened as those words were uttered. She knew she would mind terribly, but she would do it. She must be willing to compromise.

"What of the children?"

"They would be taken care of by nurses as all good children are. I would spend just as much time with them as I would if I were doing all sorts of household tasks. Your mother does not take care of children while she is embroidering or trading with merchants. She has nurses to do that."

Brian shook his head. Gradually, the humor drained from his face as he saw that she was serious. Incredulously, he stared around him as if trying to find the strength to control his mounting irritation and anger. "You will be my wife!" he burst out at last, springing to his feet and beginning to stomp back and forth across the small room. "You will be my wife! You do not need to work." He turned suddenly as an argument occurred to him. He crossed his arms across his chest, his disapproving frown etching his forehead deeply. "You would not expect to sell these things."

She looked at him amazed. "But of course. I would not work for nothing."

His control broke completely, exploding in the form of a fervent curse. Wincing, Gillian congratulated herself on her ignorance of the French language. "For money," he repeated. "You would *sell* those silly things."

"Well, what is the harm in that?" Gillian countered irritably. "You were fighting on the tourney circuit. Hob told me so. You fought for pay."

"The pay was incidental," he replied with injured hauteur. "I fought to sharpen my skills."

"Well then"—she mocked his tone—"we shall say that my pay is incidental. I merely make arrows to while away the time."

The scowl grew so deep on Brian's flushed face that Gillian feared he would be scarred. "I am a knight. You



will be my lady," he groaned at last. His teeth were set, his jaw clamped tight. "You will obey me. 'Tis God's law."

Tears filled her eyes. The argument was over. He had invoked God's law. To make contradiction was heresy. "Then we shall not marry," she sighed.

He raged. He stamped. He clenched his fists and cursed in French.

She remained adamant.

"Why?" he begged. "Can you think of one reason why you will not let me take care of you?"

She looked at him, a strange expression in her eyes. "You have only to look at Alys to see one reason made flesh."

Her answer rocked him back on his heels. For a moment he gaped, nonplused. At last he found his answer. "Ah . . . but she married an old husband. I am young and strong. You would have many sons by me. Sons who would take care of their mother."

"Suppose I did not. Suppose I were barren. I have not conceived as yet. Perhaps I may not be able to. What if you were killed in a tournament? What if your estate fell to the nearest male heir?" She looked at him squarely. "What would be my lot but to sell my few trinkets in a desperate effort to get home to Kenneth, who would by that time have forgotten my existence?" She rose, her face calm now. The anguish of the past few minutes seemed wiped clean by a new resolve.

"Gillian . . ." he put out his hand.

The conversation was interrupted by Hob's bursting into the room. "Brian! Gillian! Come quickly. . . ." The squire's face was bloody about the mouth. An eye was closing above a bright red bruise on his cheekbone. Once

in the room he slipped to one knee.

Brian caught him with a growl, lifting him into a chair. Gillian poured some wine from the pitcher on the table and held it to his lips.

"What has happened?" Brian asked when Hob had swallowed a little of the restorative. "Who dares? . . ."

"Alys and I were beset as we walked down the dock together," he groaned. "Her stepson Jules ordered his lackeys to beat me and throw me to the fishes." He grinned crookedly and rubbed his knuckles. "Evidently they thought I was you, Lady Gillian. They were quite surprised when I fought back."

"We must get her back." Gillian sprang to her feet. "She truly fears what Jules may do to her. She says he is as crazy as her husband, his father."

"What direction would they take her?" Brian asked.

Hob drained the wine and flexed his hand again, wincing in pain. "I heard him boast to her about taking her immediately to the convent. He promised her that he would request that she be made to begin a period of rigorous fasting and self-denial to cleanse her soul of her unholy thoughts."

"Oh, poor Alys." Gillian turned to grasp Brian's arm. "She is to be sent to the convent of the Poor Clare's near Amiens. It is a very strict sisterhood. They take a vow of silence."

Brian looked doubtful. "Perhaps that is the best thing for her. . . . Women without men . . ." He bit his lip. Alys's problems faded for a moment as the truth of what Gillian had said dawned on him.

"Brian?" Hob asked doubtfully as he staggered to his feet.

Gillian, too, stared at the knight as emotions played

across his handsome face. Bitterly, she realized that at least he recognized her problems even if he could not sympathize with them. "Sir Brian," she prodded him gently. "You know the countryside. Which route would they take to Amiens?"

Blinking, he came back to the room. Gillian and Hob were waiting for him deferentially as the natural leader to direct them. He smiled at the feelings their confident expressions engendered. "Which way to Amiens? Did they ride away?"

"I believe so. A man nearby was holding some horses." Hob shrugged. "I cannot say for certain. Is there another way?"

"Assuredly. They could take ship here at Calais and sail around the coast to the mouth of the Somme. A small boat could take them thence from Abbeville to Amiens." He thought a moment. "That might be the logical way to carry her. A person is easily held captive on a boat. The boat itself is a prison. No embarrassing questions need be answered if the prisoner gets noisy, so long as the captain and the crew are well paid."

Remembering her own experience with the captain of the *Maudelayne*, Gillian shuddered. "There are probably plenty of captains who would make money any way they could."

Both men nodded.

"Should we try to hire a boat and follow them then?" Hob asked.

Gillian stiffened. She had vowed to herself that only the return trip to England would get her on a boat again and that the voyage would be made on the calmest day of the year. Nervously, she glanced through the window at the bright blue sky.

"I think not," Brian was saying. "'Tis no more than thirty leagues to Amiens by horse. The roads are good. We can be there before them. They will not be expecting us. With a bit of luck on our side, we can greet them as they disembark."

"What about guards?" Gillian looked meaningfully at Hob's bruised, cut face.

"They are not professional," Hob laughed. "Just a few burly servants. Clods all. they could barely swing their fists. I threw all three of them into the channel."

"We must select a suitable mount for Gil." Brian began to gird himself for riding.

"I shall take care of that," Hob offered.

"No." Brian stopped him eyeing the injured face also. "I suggest you lie down for a space and rest. "Gil and I will see to the preparations. When all is ready, we will come for you." When Hob would have protested, the knight raised his hand imperiously. "The extra rest will help to restore you. We will ride fast. Although you are strong, you have had a shock."

Hob grinned gratefully. "As you command, my lord." He bowed formally before sinking down on the cot. "But knight's are not supposed to cater to their squires. Quite the contrary, you know."

On the street Brian led the way, with Gil flanking him on the left shoulder. "You really are a kind, considerate man," she told him at last.

He did not stop. If anything, his strides lengthened as though he did not want to hear what she was saying.

Still she felt compelled to say more. "You look after Hob as if he were your own, yet you claim he left you to

die. You love me and care for me, even though I am not of your class and your debt is long paid. Now you hie off across France after a woman whom you do not know, whose cause you do not heartily espouse."

"She is a lady in distress," Brian reminded her stiffly, still staring straight ahead of him. "A knight is supposed to rescue such a one."

"Ah, yes," Gillian smiled. "The code of chivalry. I quite forgot about that."

"I never do," Brian remarked forbiddingly as he strode into the dimness of the stable.

The horse for Gillian constituted more of a problem than Brian had at first supposed. She could not ride. At least not well enough to ride the two iron-mouthed mounts the stable owner would rent. Wicked-looking, ill-trained animals both, they intimidated her even standing in their stalls.

Seeing the size of the youth and noting the growing disgust of the knight, the owner cleared his throat hesitantly. "I have a palfrey," he suggested. "A rather nice little thing, she be. A lady's mount to be sure; but since the lad be not a rider, perhaps she would be just the thing."

With a fierce scowl, Brian nodded. The man hurried off to another aisle of stalls. "Just the thing for you," Brian told her aside. "I would have asked for it first, but I feared he might become suspicious. We have enough trouble without someone discovering your sex."

The stable man trotted out the small gray animal leading her around and patting her nose with something like affection. "Nice mount," he explained. "Just small. The lady to whom she belonged died. The widower was selling off all her things. Quite heartbroken, he was."

"Do you have trappings to go with her then?" Brian inquired.

"Full gear."

"How much?"

While the two chaffered, Gillian patted the velvety nose. "You are a dear thing," she whispered in the black ear that flicked back to hear the compliment. "You will not be so ill mannered as to throw me will you?" The small mare snuffled into her hand.

"Saddle the three then," Brian ordered. "Bring them round to the front of *La Reine d'Or* in half an hour."

"Milord." The man pulled his forelock as he pocketed a sizable profit.

Pulling Gillian away from the mare, Brian led her out of the stable. "You had better change your mind about marrying me," he said severely. "You are costing me a fortune. I should hate to spend all this money for nothing."

"I will pay you back," she replied haughtily. "Remember I make my own money."

Angry at her answer, he hastened off down the street.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

Jules de Chambeaux preened against the rail of the Somme River barge that drew him nearer and nearer to his goal. His black eyes glowed with a savage light as they scanned the tiny deckhouse in the stern. Alys would not enjoy her last moments of freedom, he vowed.

He had taken great pleasure in locking her inside, refusing her all food, and keeping her dressed in the same worn soiled clothing. The sight of her would add to the severity of the welcome the abbess would bestow on her. He chuckled grimly, relishing the thought of his step-mother's embarrassment.

Turning back to the rail he stared hard. The twin spires of Amiens cathedral, built almost two hundred years earlier, rose dimly in the distance. Soon. Soon his revenge would be complete.

Leisurely, he extracted the key from his pocket. By evening this last pitiful symbol of parental authority would be safely locked away, imprisoned in what he hoped would be a living hell for the rest of her natural life. An unpleasant smile played about his thick lips as he

strolled to the door and unlocked it.

"Ah, *ma mère*." He bowed mockingly as he paused in the door of the dim cabin, his eyes taking in the drooping figure sitting in the center of the room in the only chair.

The despairing woman hardly stirred. Exhausted and terrified, Alys had ceased to hope. When escape seemed within her grasp, Jules had appeared out of nowhere, seizing and beating Hob despite Alys's tearful pleas that Hob was not the man with whom she had escaped, that he was innocent. Had her cries not threatened to draw a crowd on the dock, she had no doubt that Jules would have stayed to see him killed instead of dragging her away.

Now she did not move as Jules strolled across the cabin. Shivering at his touch, she endured his hand on her shoulder.

"Look at me," he demanded exerting such pressure that her slight bones ground together.

Like a trapped and dying animal, she raised her tear-drenched eyes to his face. The signs of his debauchery and self-indulgence were evident in his corpulent form, in the double chin that hung over the filthy collar of his undertunic. Staring at his greasy pock-marked skin, she shuddered.

With a snarl he spat in her upturned face.

Flinching, she turned her head away and wiped her cheek, but his persistent and painful grip on her shoulder brought her back.

"Your disposal will complete my revenge, madame," he chortled. "When you are safely locked away at Amiens, I shall have finished with all who abused me in my lifetime." He waited, hoping she would beg, but he was doomed to disappointment. Angrily, he pushed her aside. The force of his thrust upset the chair, toppling it over backward with Alys in it.



He laughed as she wallowed helplessly in a tangle of legs and arms. Strolling around in a circle, regarding her prone form from all angles, he threw back his head and laughed. "I shall have a new motto for Bellepaix," he bragged. "'Vengeance is mine.' Sounds good. Sounds strong."

He nudged her weakly struggling form with his boot. "What do you say?"

"Why?" she whimpered. "Why do you feel the need for such awful vengeance? I was willing, eager to return to England. I would never have bothered you more."

He dropped down on one knee beside her, his face only inches from hers. "Ah, but you might have been happy," he snarled. "And I could not risk that. No." He resumed his pacing, enjoying the sight of her huddled on the floor. "No, I could not bear the thought that somewhere in the world, one who had done me a wrong might be prospering."

Alys buried her face in her hands.

"Do not hide your face from me, dear Alys," he warned. "I want to see those lovely tear-drenched eyes of English blue. I want to dream about them at night. They will comfort me."

Wearily, she raised her head, her eyes staring steadily at a small spot on the wall above his shoulder. "The convent will be peaceful after this," she observed with only a hint of spirit.

"Think you so?" He laughed. "You cannot imagine the things I have planned for you. The things I will whisper in the ear of the Mother Abbess. I have told them you are an English whore who was given to my father in marriage. He was deceived, I have said, and bitterly regretted his wife. You will enter the convent without dowry to work for your keep."

"I was no whore," Alys averred softly.

Ignoring her comment, Jules went down on one knee. Gripping her slender wrists, he pulled her hands toward him. "Such white soft hands," he purred. "Oh, how it pleasures me to think of them gnarled and rough, with blisters and chilblains throbbing as you try to sleep on a rough board with only a thin blanket for covering."

Her eyes widened in horror as they stared at each other, face to face. "Monster!" she hissed at last.

"You are the monster," he insisted. "You had me removed as a youth from my home, sent away to that wretched school. I never saw my father alone again. Never! You wrecked my life. Furthermore, you sought to supplant me in my father's favor. If you could have conceived a child for him, you would have had me disinherited. It would have been so easy." He laughed. "Except that the old fool was quite exhausted by the time he married you." He sprang up and strode around the room, laughing wildly. "Exhausted. Oh, the richness of it. Just like the manor of Bellepaix. Exhausted until your tainted riches rebuilt it."

"I think you might at least thank me for that," Alys begged. "Without my fortune you would have nothing to inherit."

Again he ignored her. "I shall suggest to the abbess that you be forced to wear a hairshirt," he crowed. "And you shall be fed only the scraps from the table. And you shall be required to scrub all the floors on your knees."

In terror Alys cowered. Flecks of spittle whitened his lips. Suddenly, he lunged at her. "But first you shall serve me."

The thing she had dreaded most was upon her. A swift blow to the side of her face cut short her scream of horror. Releasing the violence he had worked himself up

to, he ripped and tore her clothing aside giving his hands access to her breasts.

Again she screamed in agony as his hands squeezed her and his fingernails tore at her white flesh. "Mercy! Oh, please, Jules. No . . . oh, God . . ."

"I wanted you!" he snarled ravening at her mouth like a dog. "I wanted you. Father should have married you to me instead of taking you for himself. If you had been nice to me, we could both have had what we wanted. But you spurned me. I was a stripling youth beneath your notice. I watched how you bared your white breasts around Father. I watched him fondle you when you first came to the house. You never noticed me. But now you will. Now you will!"

Even as he shouted at her, he tore her hose away, ripping them down over her legs, exposing her most private parts to his frenzied lust. Pulling aside his codpiece, he lunged forward into her body.

Alys thought she would be torn in two. Like a file he rasped the unprepared chamber of her body. Celibate for several years even before her husband's death, she was tight as a virgin. Her screams as he pulled back and lunged again turned to agonized sobs. Sweat dripped from him, splashing in her eyes and on her bosom. Blinded as well as crushed, she slumped lifelessly under him.

With a curse he thrust again and again, the sense of victory lessened only minimally by his victim's insensibility to the ultimate triumph. Grunting and panting, he pumped his seed into her body and collapsed.

When he could move at last, he rolled over and sat up. The stuffy deckhouse was now unpleasantly hot. His clothing stuck to his gross body as he grimly fastened himself up and rose laboriously to his feet.

Without a backward glance he staggered toward the

door. As he opened it, he heard a faint moan behind him. "Get your clothing in some kind of order," he commanded her over his shoulder, "else I lead you through the streets of Amiens as you are—half naked."

When the door slammed behind him, Alys rolled over sobbing. The heat and the sickening odors of the cabin assailed her senses. Her abused body ached fearfully. But worse was the knowledge that her own stepson had raped her. Would even God forgive her for the hideous sin to which she had been a party? In her mind she had been a party to incest, an abomination of the most damnable sort. And so she wept, great gulping sobs that finally trailed away into a sort of comatose sleep.

She was unconscious for only a few minutes, though for all she knew, the time might have been longer. Sounds—shouting, thudding of bodies, the clashing of steel on steel—aroused her. She struggled to sit up, then slumped back in a despairing heap. What matter what went on outside? She closed her eyes.

"Lady Alys!"

Someone was shaking her shoulder.

"Good God! What has he done to her?"

That sounded strangely like Gil's light voice.

"The swine has undoubtedly raped her."

"Y-yes," Alys whispered. "Please . . . help me. . . ."

"We will, my lady." Hob slipped his arm around her shoulders and lifted her upright.

"Get something to put around her," Gil pleaded. "We cannot carry her away in that condition. But we must get her from this awful place."

Embarrassed despite her terrible shock, Alys plucked ineffectually at the ragged edges of her garments. "My clothing . . . Yes . . . He tore . . . my . . ." She broke off with a sob. A great swirling blackness swept in from

the corners of her mind as Hob lifted her to her feet.

Gillian's body shuddered with nausea as she staggered to the door of the small deckhouse. With difficulty she made the railing before giving up all she had.

Brian glanced over his shoulder, then swung round alarmed at the sight of her. Drained of all color except for a greenish tinge around the mouth, her face shocked him. A couple of swift strides took him across the deck to support her with an arm around her shoulders.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Jules de Chambeaux attempted to rally his men who had been cowering back against the rail, held on their knees by Brian's deadly blade.

"Seize him!" he hissed, dragging one burly brute to his feet.

Shaking his head in fear, the man hung back. "He has a sword, milord."

"I know that, fool. Seize him while his back is turned. Up, you mongrels! Up! Earn your keep." Jules's wrath exploded over his servants' heads as he kicked and pummeled them uselessly.

Brian turned from his attention to Gillian. "What have you done, bastard? What did she see?"

Before Jules could reply, Hob bore the unconscious Alys through the door. Her fair face lolling sideways over the squire's arm looked like a dead woman's. Paths made by tears and sweat furrowed her dusty cheeks.

Brian's face contorted in pity. "Is she dead?"

"No, alive, but barely," came Hob's terse answer as he made for the gangplank.

Furious at their interference, Jules sprang to bar the way. "You are kidnapping my kinswoman!" he screamed.

Hob's reply was sharp as a blade. "If she is your kinswoman, why have you treated her in this manner? You

owe her your protection not abuse."

Jules clenched his fists; his black eyes glowed redly in his anger. "She is mine to do with as I see fit. I have made arrangement for her housing in the Convent of the Poor Clares. She is to spend the rest of her life in penance for her sins."

Brian had moved to stand at Hob's back, his arm supporting a barely recovered Gillian. "Is she willing to embrace this life?"

"I have convinced her that she should." Jules planted himself in front of the gangplank to bar their progress.

"How?" In her anger and disgust, Gillian's voice cracked and trembled. "By rape?"

"Is that what the whore told you?" Jules sneered. "How like her to lie to appear innocent. She tried to seduce me. Tore off her clothing and offered me her filthy body. I resisted, of course. But afterward, righteous rage overcame me. I punished her perhaps a bit severely for her evil acts."

"Liar!" Gillian accused.

Jules glared at her. "Are you the youth whom she persuaded to take her away? I suspect you were easily deceived because of your young years. She is dipped in sin, make no mistake."

"In that case," said Hob smoothly, "you should be glad to get her off your hands. We will take her with us and be gone. Step aside." He moved to shoulder past the fat man.

"No!" Jules cried. "She is my duty and my chattel. I demand that you give her up to me."

"So that you may beat her and rape her again," Gillian snarled.

"So that I may take her to the care of the abbess at the convent," Jules argued. "Perhaps there she will find sal-

vation for her soul. Otherwise she is surely damned."

"We are wasting time." Brian laid a hand on Hob's shoulder. "Let me show him the edge of my steel."

Hob stepped aside, and Brian raised the heavy broadsword, pointing it at Jules's ponderous belly. "I promise you, sir, on my honor as a knight that if this lady truly wishes to enter the convent, we will bear her there and save you the expense and trouble. You need concern yourself no more with her."

Jules stepped back down the gangplank. "You will regret this," he whined. "She is a whore and will seduce you all. You will be damned as will she. I only seek the salvation of her soul. Punish the body to cleanse the soul," he recited piously.

Steadily, Brian advanced, the gleaming blade flashing fire in the last slanting rays of the dying sun. Menacingly, he moved the sword in a small circle as if sighting the best target for his attack.

Jules held up his hands. "Have a care, sir knight. This gangplank may be slippery. Have a . . ." His heel came down in thin air. Precariously he teetered for a moment; his arms windmilled furiously. His own bulk made him unwieldy. Like a great stone he dropped over the edge of the plank and into the slow-moving waters of the Somme with a tremendous splash.

Grinning like a very devil, Brian sprang to the dock and bowed low, pointing the way with his swordpoint. "Come, Hob. Come, Gil. Clear the gangplank. I am sure M'sieur Chambeaux's servants need the space to fish their master out of the river."

Alys did not stir as Hob bore her through the street away from the quay and into the interior of the town. "Where shall we take her?" he asked anxiously.

Brian shook his head. "Her condition undoubtedly com-

plicates things. She cannot ride the mount I hired for her."

"I would feel safer were we away from here," Gillian cast a nervous glance over her shoulder. "I know Jules has not given up. He sent a man to follow us."

Looking over his shoulder, Brian cursed fervently in French. "I shall put a stop to that," he said as the fellow in Jules's livery ducked in at the door of a small shop.

"No." Gillian put a hand on his arm. "We are already attracting too much attention. In truth, we are kidnapping her from her lawful guardian bearing her to a nunnery. Our actions are indefensible to any sheriff or bailiff that Jules might care to call in."

"Gil is right," Hob agreed. "Let us get the horses and ride. I can carry the lady for a while. If we hurry, we can perhaps make some inn in the countryside before the darkness gets too deep. If not, we can sleep in the open, but let us quit this town."

"Oh, yes," Gillian urged. "Let us do as Hob says. Jules is utterly mad. You did not see the condition of Alys's body as I did. And the room where she was imprisoned was unbelievable."

Surrendering to her impassioned plea, Brian held out his arms to take Alys from Hob. "Go before us," he commanded. "Saddle the horses and purchase what supplies you can. We shall wait for you outside the city at the fountain by the Abbeville gate."

As Alys's unconscious body was passed between them, Hob's cloak fell away from her side exposing her bare breast. Brian drew in his breath at the sight. Jules's nails had left hideous scratches radiating inward toward the aureole. A trickle of blood stemming from the nipple had dried on the underside of the swollen bruised mound.

Accustomed to sights of carnage on the battlefield, the knight nevertheless could not remain unmoved by this



evidence of deliberate torture. "Poor lady," he murmured.

Hob nodded, the lines of his face more deeply etched than ever. Gently as if bestowing a benediction, he covered the tormented form. Then he turned and dashed off down the street.

Dusk was falling. Fog rising from the river began to filter in through the streets and alleyways. The pleasant cathedral town began to take on a sinister appearance as merchants closed their shops and locked their doors. Shutters were firmly fastened from the inside on all windows. The night watch had not yet made his rounds to light the lamps so the entire town seemed to be deserted.

"Follow close to me," Brian commanded Gillian. "In fact, hang on to my cloak. That way if you should stumble you can catch yourself."

Gillian shivered uncontrollably. Not only the chill fog from the river but also her terror of Jules preyed on her mind. A pure innocent only a short time out of York Minster, her experiences with Ranulf, the captain of the *Maudelayne*, and now Jules combined to drive her to the brink of hysteria. Like a child in a nightmare she followed Brian through the streets, clutching at his cloak with hands that were cold as ice.

All around her was ghostly silence, broken only occasionally by a strange sound. The fog that muffled their footsteps also muffled the footsteps of their pursuers, she reasoned fearfully. As they passed the door of a house, a hound bayed thunderously. Gillian gave a terrified scream as she threw herself against Brian's back. Simultaneously, the creature could be heard flinging itself against the closed door with a muffled thud followed by a confusion of scufflings and scratchings as it sought to get out to attack.

"Easy," Brian's voice came, strong and comforting in the darkness. "Easy, my love. We will win through safely. It cannot get to us."

But the hound's growls which followed them down the street were a light in the darkness, Gillian thought, to lead the pursuers after them. As its voice finally ceased, she listened feverishly, trying to pick up the sounds of footsteps in the fog.

"How much farther?"

Brian stumbled as his foot turned on the uneven cobblestones. With a curse he righted himself. "I cannot tell. This damned fog."

"How can we find the fountain?" Gillian whispered. "For that matter, how can we find the gate? Are you sure you know the way?"

Indeed, Brian himself was beginning to doubt his direction. Amiens was no different from all medieval towns in that the maze of streets turned and twisted like rabbit warrens. Built purposefully in that manner to break the force of the wind and conserve heat in the dwellings, the seemingly insane configuration also allowed several dwellings to utilize the same walls. Furthermore, the presence of neighbors within calling distance made for security.

Suddenly, out of the darkness torches flickered faintly. "The gate!" Brian exclaimed. Sure enough, the Abbeville gate to the town loomed before them, its huge wooden doors closed and barred for the night, its torches smoking fitfully in the damp air.

"How can we get out?" Gillian stared aghast.

"Through the sally port," Brian whispered. "We may have to grease the porter's palm to get it opened, but I think he will oblige us."

"If Jules has not gotten to him first," Gillian breathed.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

That thought had also occurred to Brian. While one part of his mind was intent on finding their way through the winding streets, the other mulled over the distinct possibility that Jules had set men to guard the only two exits from the walled town.

Inwardly, he cursed himself for sending Hob away from him. Though valuable time would have been lost, the absence of the squire, a seasoned fighter, left him with sole responsibility for two women. As he came to a halt, Gillian grasped his shoulders and pressed herself against his back. He could feel her shivering through the double thickness of their clothing.

"What shall we do?" Her voice was barely a thread of sound in the darkness. Her breath brushed his ear, so close did she press against him.

He shook his head. "'Tis a problem. Of course, the

gate may be unguarded. We may be able to walk up, pay the guard, and pass through without a murmur."

"Otherwise?"

"At the very least, a man may run to tell Jules that we left the city by the Abbeville road." She felt his great shoulders shrug. "At the very worst, we may be walking into a trap."

He felt her shudder. Her voice was high and weak yet steady. "Shall I go ahead and investigate?"

"Gillian!" he chided aghast. "I am the knight. I am supposed to defend you."

She squeezed his arm at the same time she nuzzled her cheek against his shoulder. "I know. You do it so well. But if they are there, they are expecting you. All of Jules's men saw you and will remember you forever. I could muffle my cloak about my face and attract no attention."

"You were in Jules's house for twenty-four hours," he reminded her sternly. "They would remember you."

Gillian straightened herself away from him. Pulling her hat down low over her forehead, she tossed the cloak around her shoulders. "They would not be expecting you to send me," she declared reasonably. "No fighting man in his right mind would send a boy."

"No!" Before he could say more, she strode away from him toward the flickering torches. The fog swirled and billowed around her legs before it swallowed her figure entirely. "Gillian!"

More terrified than she would let him know, Gillian hesitated before the door of the porter's box. Actually it was a small hut built in the side of the wall in front of the sally port. The port therefore could only be reached by rousing the porter and getting him to open first his door

and then the chained and barred inner door in the thick stone wall.

Strange thudding sounds reached her ears muffled by the dense fog. Her heart. She pressed her hand against her bosom. The sounds were inside her, not out. Dear God! But she was cold and scared. Above the gate, the flambeau smoked and wavered fitfully.

She closed one hand around the other, forcing her chilled fingers to make a fist. Then tucking her chin and mouth more securely within the folds of her cloak, she rapped strongly. At first no one answered. As she listened nervously, again the only sound she heard was the pounding of her heart.

Time stretched agonizingly along her already frayed nerves. She rapped again more loudly and pressed her ear against the door. Did she hear a sound? No. Drawing away in disgust, she looked to right and left in the cold muffling darkness.

"Gillian . . ." Brian strode toward her out the dense fog, bearing Alys, who at last stirred feebly in his arms.

"S-s-ssh! No one seems to be about, unless someone is hidden inside."

Behind her she heard a dry rasping sound as if someone were dragging a heavy bundle across an uneven floor. A tiny peephole in the door swung open. Only the faintest of lights shone through.

"Who goes?"

Brian spoke behind her. "Travelers for Hangest, monsieur." Drawing close to him, Gillian cleared her throat. "We are friends. Ah . . . that is . . . my family and I must leave the city tonight."

"Gate's closed." The peephole started to close.

"Oh, but one of us is sick," Brian hastily interposed.

Alys moaned pitifully, and Gillian gave a hacking cough for effect. "And I am feeling so bad. We all want to get home . . . tonight."

She thought the porter spoke to someone; then his face reappeared at the peephole. "Stand in the light of the torch."

At Brian's nod, Gillian moved nearer to the wall, pulling the cloak around her more tightly and shrinking inside it as if she were shivering uncontrollably.

Brian staggered slightly as he spoke. "Please, sir, for God's sake. Let me go through with my old father and my wife's little brother. Father is bad sick. All feverish and swollen."

"Swollen!" The porter's voice sounded instantly alert. "Swollen where?"

"Oh, up around the throat and down around the privates."

Following this information an excited conversation could now be heard. The gatekeeper was clearly arguing loudly. The words *plague* and *buboes* rose above all the rest.

Gillian judged the time was right to throw in a fervent plea. She thrust her face up close to the peephole, coughing painfully. "*S'il vous plaît, m'sieur, mon père est . . .*" Since she had exhausted her vocabulary, she fell away from the door coughing so deeply that she thought she would tear her throat.

Evidently, the porter did too, for he slammed the peephole to and unbarred the heavy door. Sagging on its hinges, it swung back, leaving a quarter-circle groove in the hard-packed earth and making a fearful grating sound.

"Wait!" he snarled. "Do not enter until I tell you,

then go straight through touching nothing. Do you understand?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*" Gillian tried again. Brian gathered the cloak more tightly around Alys, who, too, began to cough.

They heard the chains rattle, the bolt grate. "Go!" The porter drew back against the wall. "Touch nothing."

Another man also pressed back against the wall of the hut, but he did not cower. Instead he stood upright, taking in Brian's tall broad-shouldered form and that of the cloaked figure he bore. Midway across the room, he stepped forward. "Stop!"

Gillian froze in her tracks. If only she had her bow . . . Prepared to fling herself upon the villain, she tensed. But help came from out of nowhere. "Are you mad?" Seizing the other man by the collar, the porter spun him around and shoved his body into the corner. "They have the plague. The old man is dying of it. They must get out of the city." He spun back. "Go. . . ."

But they were already gone. With a growl of satisfaction he slammed the port and shot the bolt.

"I can walk," Alys whispered when the door closed behind them.

"Rest easy, dear lady," Brian replied. "The distance we go is but a few steps. Then we will all rest and wait for Hob to join us."

The sound of trickling water drew them through the fog. "How will Hob get here?" Gillian asked nervously. "We would never have gotten out at all had you not thought of the plague."

Brian set his burden down on a stone bench beside the fountain and rotated his shoulders to ease the strain. "Hob should have no trouble at all. Jules's spy will have

gone to report to his master. When Hob comes, the only problem he will have is getting the horses and supplies through the port. The porter might not be willing to open again."

"I have caused you no end of trouble," Alys mourned softly. "I should have submitted gracefully and gone into the convent. It might not have been so bad," she faltered.

"If you did not want to go, dear lady," Brian observed, "it would have been very bad indeed. The cloistered life is not for everyone."

"I can think of nothing worse," Gillian agreed.

Brian chuckled suddenly. "Certainly, I can think of no one less inclined for the monastic life than you, Gil. Also your French was very good. You sounded almost like a Frenchman."

She blushed in the dark. "I had a good teacher. When I ran out of words, I just coughed. Did I really do well?" Both Brian and Alys assured her that her accent was superb. "You must teach me many more words."

They sat, huddled companionably in their cloaks, Lady Alys on the stone bench, Brian on the ground beside her with his arm around Gillian, holding her back against his chest. Together they taught her all the words they could think of as well as how to string them together in sentences.

Despite the chilly dampness of the night, the time was a time of peace. Alys said nothing about the two she believed to be men sitting in a close embrace at her feet. In her gratitude for her saviors, she had cast aside all her past attitudes. They loved. She was pleased for them. Indeed a twinge of envy touched her at the warmth they shared while she sat alone.

Long past midnight Gillian had fallen asleep on Brian's



shoulder and Alys, too, had wrapped herself in her cloak and lain down on the hard stone bench. Brian roused himself when he felt rather than heard the vibration of approaching hoofbeats. Several horses moved slowly through the fog.

Easing Gillian gently to the ground and covering her closely with both their cloaks, he started in their direction. He would encounter whoever was approaching away from the girls. He loosened his sword in its scabbard.

Dark silhouettes appeared out of the fog. "Hob!"

"Brian. Thank God!"

"What are you doing so far off the road?"

"I left by the Peronne gate," the squire chuckled. "Encountered a fellow that I knew must have been Jules's man. Knocked him down. The porter was not pleased but declined to argue with a sword at his throat."

Brian chuckled in his turn. "We encountered one at the Abbeville gate. The porter knocked him down for us."

"No! How did you manage that?"

"Another story for another time. Gillian and Alys are alone asleep at the fountain. We must rouse them and put distance between Amiens and Jules before dawn. This fountain is practically under the wall. Let us go quickly."

And quickly they did depart. Steadily, Brian led his group through the night. Alys and Gillian both insisted they were well rested and strong enough to ride. So four horsemen clattered across the Somme River bridge at Hangest.

"Where are we bound?" Hob asked while they rested

the horses on the east bank.

"We make for Beauvais," Brian told him. "My home. Jules will not look for us in this direction. The ride is not so long."

"But . . ." Hob began.

"It is best," Brian declared repressively.

Hob shrugged. He was a squire. Where the knight led, the squire followed. But he hated to think of Lady Gillian's wrath when she discovered that Brian had led them deeper into France.

By late evening the next day, the weary party reached Château de la Forêt. Alys had been riding pillion since the last rest stop when her courage had failed her. She could no longer bear the pain in her abused thighs. Hob had taken her up behind him.

In the twilight the château looked shaggy somehow. Great swaths of ivy trailed across its windows and quite covered most of the chimneys of the house. One of the chestnuts in the lane running beside the low wall was dead, its skeletal limbs lifted like a pleading hand to the indigo heavens.

Dismayed and a little concerned at the appearance of the château, Brian nevertheless led his exhausted troop onward. A stodgy peasant youth in smock and drooping hose challenged them at the gate. In a slightly startled tone, Brian identified their party.

"The Sire de Trenanay does not expect you. He would have told me. He gave strict orders—"

"Damn!" Brian spurred his tired horse past the dull youth. "Follow me!" he called as he led the way past the wall and up toward the château.

Even in the twilight the once-elegant formal gardens looked decidedly seedy and overgrown. The hedges, formerly cut in fantastic shapes, had lost their identities and run wild.

"The *forêt* certainly seems intent on reclaiming its own," Hob whispered dryly over his shoulder to Alys who slumped against him.

The lady raised her drooping head, but all around her was little to be seen. "Are we still in France?" she whispered.

"I fear so."

"God protect me."

Hob squeezed her hands where they clasped him at his waist. "I feel we have seen the last of your stepson, lady. He could not know which direction we traveled. We left by different gates and were observed. *Voilà!* Conflicting reports! He will expect us to head for the coast . . . either west or north. We ride south."

She shuddered. "I pray God you are right, but I long for England. Sometimes I do not think I shall ever see it again."

Ahead of them Brian's destrier clanged and clattered under the carriage arch.

"How can you see where you ride?" Gillian asked, disgust evident in her voice.

"We were not expected," Brian mumbled apologetically. "Father and Mother would have sent escorts to greet us had I been able to send Hob ahead with news of our arrival."

"Are you sure they still live here? This place looks deserted." Gillian did not move from the saddle. Despite being almost weary unto death, she could barely control her blazing anger at what she considered to be Brian's

trickery. When he came to her side and held up his arms, only with great reluctance did she allow him to help her down.

Leaving her leaning against the balustrade, he climbed the staircase and banged the lion's-head knocker authoritatively. The hollow sound echoed and reechoed in the rooms beyond.

Complete darkness filled the inside of the carriage arch. Behind him Brian could hear Hob stumble and curse as he helped Alys down. Worriedly, he lifted the knocker again.

His father must be alive. The gatekeeper had mentioned him. In the old days the lamps on either side of the carriage arch as well as on either side of the door were always kept lighted.

Still no answer. "Wrap your cloak around you and sit down, Alys. Looks like we sleep out tonight again." Gillian's voice dripped sarcasm. "Ah . . . *la belle France*. The stories I shall tell when I reach home . . . if I ever reach home."

Angry and exhausted, Brian raised his voice in a bellow. "Father! Mother! Stephen!"

Alys jumped and whimpered faintly as the stentorian challenge bounced off the walls of the carriage arch. "Maybe they have moved away. How long have you been gone?" Gillian called bitinglly as she put her arm around the smaller woman to comfort her.

"Four years," replied Brian, his voice gruff with worry.

From behind the door came a faint shuffling sound; a bolt was drawn. The heavy oak door slid open a few inches. A man's outraged face appeared at the aperture. "Be gone! Have you no respect? The Sire de Trenanay is

near to death." He started to slam the heavy door.

With a vicious oath Brian smashed his strong shoulder against the paneling. The door exploded inward catapulting the servant across the entry. "Enter and welcome!" the knight called to his companions.

Like tired children they filed in after him and huddled together in an entryway lighted by a huge iron lantern suspended on a great chain from the second story. A stone staircase, the extension of the one they had mounted from the carriage entrance, curved upward.

A woman stood midway up, her withered face stiff with outrage. As Brian's foot touched the first step, he saw her. "Mother!"

"Brian." The voice was cold and cracked, the voice of an old woman, although her black-clothed body was firmly erect. Not a twinge of emotion other than faint annoyance appeared in her face. He might have been arriving late for supper, rather than returning home after a long absence.

"Mother, the servant said that Father is near to death." Brian advanced several steps upward to meet his mother.

With measured stately tread she came slowly down the steps. Repressively, she extended her hand, allowing him to drop to his knee and kiss it. Then she withdrew it from his grasp and continued her descent. She did not exactly brush him aside, Gillian decided, but she certainly did not gather him into a welcoming embrace. "He is instructed to do so. The lie is convenient to keep away unwanted visitors."

The woman who was Brian's mother crossed the floor of the entry, pausing momentarily before the huddled group. Dark eyes regarded them from out of her pale face

as she might have regarded some particularly loathesome creatures that Brian might have brought home with him.

"Where is Stephen?" Brian trailed her across the floor. She pushed back the heavy oak door that opened into an ancient baronial hall.

"Stephen is dead," the woman said coldly as her son came abreast of her.

"Stephen? Dead?" The words were a cry torn from Brian's throat. As if he had been struck, he fell to his knees. Gillian sprang forward, clutching his arm, supporting him as he moaned in anguish, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. The terrible strain of the past few days when he had been the sole protector and leader of the group, the sleepless nights, the forced marches, all combined to break him, coupled as they were with the terrible news.

Hob, who had been assisting Alys, released her and stepped forward to put his hand on Brian's shoulder.

Gillian flashed an enraged glance at the woman who stood aside holding the door open and surveying the scene with a smirk of satisfaction about her mouth. "Brian," she murmured. "Brian, take heart!"

"Stephen," he moaned.

Alys hurried across the flagstones to pull a dusty chair from the end of a banquet table. A startled exclamation escaped her at the sight of the festoons of filthy cobwebs spun across the armrests. Steeling herself not to think about the spiders who had spun them, she wiped them away with her hand. Hastily, she swiveled the chair around to accept Brian's staggering form as the other two helped him to it.

With something suspiciously like a sob, Brian slumped down in the chair, bowing his head and shading his eyes

with his hand. Gillian knelt in front of him to place a comforting palm against his cold cheek.

"Brandy?" Hob snapped.

With a desultory wave of her hand the woman indicated the sideboard. Perhaps two inches of murky brown liquid remained in a dusty carafe. Wiping a glass on the inside lining of his cloak, Hob poured a generous amount. Cautiously, he smelled it, then sipped it, before carrying it to Brian's lips.

The knight downed it on one swallow. Gillian lovingly brushed back his sandy hair from his ashen face. "Who is Stephen?" she asked softly.

"My brother . . ."

The woman laughed nastily from the doorway. The four stared at her as she advanced menacingly. The light of malevolence shone so strongly from her eyes that Alys crossed herself involuntarily. Trailing her black garments across the stones, she stopped within a yard of Brian.

"Your half brother," the woman sneered. "Stephen was never your full brother. When he died, how I enjoyed telling Trenanay the truth. You are my son, but not his."

## *Chapter Thirty*

At the instructions of the chatelaine of La Forêt, the servant had shown the four of them to separate chambers in a distant wing of the château. Gillian had waited until he had gone before slipping noiselessly into Brian's chamber.

He did not stir from where he sat slumped in a chair before a cold fireplace, a single candle burning beside him. His eyes were closed; his hands, clenched around the chair arms. As she studied his still face, a muscle jumped in his jaw testifying to the iron control he was exercising over his body.

The bed had not been made, Gillian saw to her disgust. Apparently, no amenities were to be offered to the bastard son. Her whole body began to tremble in sympathy for the spiritual and mental agony he was enduring. She had seen him weak with pain, torn by



wounds, his flesh pierced over and over by Tobin's needle. He had endured all, yet instinctively, she realized that never had he seemed so brave as now when his mind and spirit were pierced over and over by the sharp words of his own mother.

She came close to him and rested a hand on top of one of his. "Brian," she breathed softly.

He flinched, jerking his hand out from under hers as if she had touched him with fire. "Leave me," he snarled, his voice unrecognizable.

"No, Brian, I will not leave you. I came to help you. Let me get you undressed and into bed before the candle burns out. Everything will look better in the morning."

"Not here," he whispered. "Never here. I want to wait until the candle burns out."

"But why, Brian?" Gently she knelt to pull off his boots. His hat she laid aside on the table. Then she reached for the buckle of his belt.

"This is Stephen's room. She put me in Stephen's room."

Gillian's hands froze. "Oh, no."

"Do you understand why I cannot bear to look—why I must wait until the candle burns out?" His voice was a singsong.

Gillian realized that he was not really thinking rationally. The multiple shocks had numbed him. "Stand up," she urged him firmly, grasping his hands and tugging on them.

"No . . ." But he had no will to resist. Like a recalcitrant child he allowed himself to be hauled to his feet and undressed. Leading him across the room, she pulled back the musty coverlet. Thank heaven the bed had sheets.

She would not have been surprised to find those missing in this neglected household.

Pushing him down on the edge, she stroked his pale cheek. "Climb in."

Closing his eyes to hide the tears, he turned his head to kiss her palm.

Stripping off her garments, she climbed in beside him and gathered him into her arms.

"This is Stephen's bed," he grated through clenched teeth.

"Good." She stroked his sweaty hair back from his forehead. "He would be glad you could use it."

"I am not so sure about that anymore."

They did not speak after that. She pulled his tired head into the circle of her arm, his face pressing against the side of her breast. He adjusted himself carefully so she would not take the weight of his head, but he could rest his lips against her smooth warm skin. His arms enclosed her waist and fitted her against him as if he sought to draw her into his body and somehow make her a part of him.

For her part she stroked her fingers rhythmically over his hair and cheek, his neck and shoulders, and across his chest. Wherever she could reach, she touched him, bestowing on him the gifts of warmth and reassurance. Despite her best intentions to remain awake until he was asleep, she drifted off within minutes, her exhausted body bent on restoring itself.

For him there was no such peace. His nerves jumped and quivered. Periodically, rigors would shake his body as if he had a fever. When these occurred, he would tighten his arms around her and clench his hands at her

waist. Over and over again, the horrifying questions tortured him. Why? How? Who?

The next day the two people who could give him the answers sat in high-backed chairs at opposite ends of the solar. Flanked by a reluctant Gillian, Brian confronted them both at noon.

Even a cursory glance revealed that the Sire de Trenanay had not long to live. The man's naturally short, thin body appeared shrunken. The once black hair was thin and gray; the sallow skin was deeply tinged with yellow. From beneath scabby eyebrows, black eyes stared at Brian. Recognition flamed, as if for only an instant the man longed to reach out to embrace the boy he had once believed to be his son. Just as quickly it died, to be replaced by a look of loathing.

Brian raised his hands toward his father before he, too, remembered and let them fall. Awkwardly, he shuffled his feet in the rushes. Embarrassed, he glanced at Gillian. What could he say?

From her chair, the chatelaine of La Forêt viewed the exchange with a cackle of satisfaction. Her fingers curved into talons as she raised them, rolling her eyes upward as if thanking God for the day. Her withered face radiated an unholy joy.

Then she clasped her hands together before her and turned her gaze on her husband. From where she stood, Gillian could see her green eyes, gold-flecked as Brian's own, blazing triumphantly. "He is not yours!" She exclaimed, spacing each word with torturous emphasis. She pushed herself out of her chair, her black garments swaying. "I warned you. You would not listen. You

doubted me and my intent. I waited long. Now feel my sword."

Brian turned toward his mother. "Who was my father, if not Trenanay?"

She shrugged. "A passing knight. An Englishman, if I remember correctly." She chuckled. "The enemy then—the enemy now."

Her husband writhed in his chair. Her words kindled the flames of hell behind his dark eyes.

"You lie," Brian denied flatly. "I am a son of this house. You have run mad."

She snarled like a panther. "Mad am I not. Had you not wondered where your coloring and size came from? Not from Trenanay, that miserable stripling."

"From you and from your father."

She laughed. "I told you that. You believed it. So did he. 'Tis true enough our eyes are of a color, but nothing else. Your father had the same sun-streaked blond hair which even now glistens in the sun on your head. If he stood here before you today, you could look him in the eye. His very body, broad shoulders and chest, tall, powerful. Just like you. Poor Stephen! Even with my blood, he never grew but an inch above me."

"But why did you wait 'til now to reveal this secret?" Brian's voice shook with pain as he accepted the truth of what she said.

His mother laughed. "Because Stephen was the heir," she explained patiently, as though he were not particularly bright. "So long as Stephen lived, I could only rejoice in secret. I had put horns on Trenanay, but I would profit nothing by telling him so. He would simply disinherit you and perhaps kill me. He might even get another wife."

Fiercely, she lunged at Trenanay, where he huddled in his chair. "You would have done that," she accused.

"With pleasure," he snarled.

She turned back to her son. "You see. I could not have him set me aside. He has not come to my bed in years. Soon after Stephen was born, he took a serving wench into his bed. Then another. Then another. His bastards populate the countryside." Suddenly, her voice quavered as remembered shame and grief overcame her. "I was his wife. I was young and not uncomely. He preferred the sluts. Said they gave him a better time in bed. I was too cold, too . . ." Her voice fell away in a cry of mingled rage and disgust.

Brian heard his mother with nausea clawing at him, a clammy film of perspiration coating his skin. How had she concealed all this hatred all these years? If her husband had not come to her bed, how had she managed to fool him when Brian was born?

Breathing heavily, her chest heaving beneath the rusty black weeds, she pointed her finger at Trenanay. "Then he informed me that he intended to visit my bed again. For insurance for the succession, he called it. Not for pleasure, not for affection, not even for desire. I could have born all those reasons. But for insurance. 'Twas then I looked afield. I planned carefully. No mistakes. I had to be sure. He lay almost every night for a fortnight, and each time before he came I blocked his passage."

"Abomination," the Sire de Trenanay cried. Frantically, he made the sign of the cross in the air before his chair. He was wild with rage. Gillian realized that he could not walk. His skeletal legs in their drooping wrinkled hose, hung down from the chair like dead things. Only the upper half of his body contorted in

agony. The man was quite literally in a living hell of mind and body.

His wife flew across the room, crouching before him, just out of reach. "Shall I tell you again what I did, old man? I pushed a vinegar soaked sponge up inside me. You were too insensitive to care that I seemed tight and that your hammering away on me did not go in deep. I pretended to moan and beg for mercy, and you laughed. 'Tight as a virgin,' you said. Called me a stick whom no man would want and laughed at me."

"Abomination! Witch!" her husband screamed. "You are damned to prevent the conception of a Christian soul."

"Would not your sluts and serving girls have given much to know my trick?" she laughed. "They conceived your Christian bastards and you cast them out. I learned the trick from one of your whores, by the way."

She whirled away from him, her motion bringing her face to face with Brian. "And then he came . . ." she jeered. "He came riding through the forest with a small troupe of mounted archers. He begged to stay the night at the château. Trenanay had left for a long stay at his hunting lodge doubtless with another of his mistresses. I offered them lodging. I offered him my bed. He was surprised. He was pleased. He called me beautiful. He kissed me as he moved above me. For the next fortnight I was well and truly loved. And then he rode away."

Brian gasped at the pain. "Who was my father?"

She hesitated. Then shook her head. "I cannot remember his name."

Brian screamed. His hands closed round her throat before Gillian could make a move to stop him. "Witch!" he screamed, throttling her. "Monster!"

"Brian!" Gillian yelled, leaping to drag her weight down on his arm.

"Kill her!" the Sire de Trenanay urged fiercely.

"Brian! For God's sake. For the sake of your own soul." Gillian forced her slim body between Brian's arms so that her face came between his and his mother's. "Brian," she pleaded. "She is your mother. Do not damn your soul."

Slowly his hands relaxed. His victim fell to the rushes of the solar in a dusty black heap and lay still. "Gillian," he muttered softly. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him hard.

Behind them they heard the old man's fierce hiss of anger and disgust. "Whoreson! Catamite!"

Brian set Gillian carefully aside. "Why? Does my lover offend you, Trenanay? At least no poor tortured girl sobs out her anguish because I have given her a bastard. At least no shamed wife plots revenge against me." He pointed at the feebly stirring figure. "She has destroyed your house. Her knife cuts deepest of all. Your line is destroyed along with my name. We were both better off dead."

The black eyes glittered; the death's head grinned slyly, speculatively. "You can do the house of Trenanay one last favor. One last act of expiation. Expiation for the sins of all." The voice sank to a whine. It cajoled. It fawned. "You with your mighty body and your precious golden principles. Ah! You thought I had forgotten them. How holy you felt when you won your spurs! I was a little bit ashamed of myself considering what I was."

Gillian caught at Brian's arm. "Do not listen to him, Brian. Come away. We will go to England. France has nothing for you anymore. Your father is English. Come."

Brian shrugged her off. "Expiation," he whispered. "Expiation."

"The sins of the fathers. The Scriptures speak of them."

"Brian! How can you listen? You have no sins. He is not your father."

"Pay my debt and your mother's," the voice begged. "Marshal Boucicaut has called for six knights and twenty men-at-arms from La Forêt to join with him to drive the English king from our shores. I cannot go. Nor have I any men to lead. But you could go. You could fight for France. You could die for the honor of Trenanay. The last of the line. I am dying even as I speak. I would acknowledge you as my son in this."

"Brian! For God's sake!"

He looked at her as if he had never seen her before. "He offers me the only course. To die with honor. I cannot live a bastard, a landless, nameless bastard."

She shook him. "Brian. You are talking to Gil. You are you. No one cares about these insane people anymore. Let us leave here now."

He nodded. "Yes. We will leave here now. I will go to my destiny. Hob will see you home." He touched her shoulder. "Let us leave here now," he repeated. As one in a trance, he led the way from the room.

Shivering in the grip of pure hatred such as she had never thought herself capable of, she glared at the two who remained. "Monsters!" she spat. "Monsters!" Whirling, she ran after him.

"No, Hob. I thank you, but I ride alone. You are an Englishman. I go to fight for France."



Hob shook his head. "You are an Englishman too, from what Lady Gillian tells me. You should join with Harry. Not Charles."

"My mother was French. A Frenchman reared me." Brian swallowed hard as he remembered the pain of Trenanay's rejection. "I could not . . ."

"Then I will accompany you," Hob promised simply. "A squire should go with his knight. I followed my father from Russia to Algeciras. We fought for whoever would pay for our sword . . . Christian or pagan. The squire obeys the knight."

Brian felt a lump rise in his throat. How could he ever have doubted this man? He shook his head. "If you will obey me, then you must see the ladies back safe to England." He pulled a heavy purse from beneath his fustian tunic. "Here is everything. I will leave all I own here at La Forêt. My fa— The Sire de Trenanay reluctantly agreed to buy it from me for gold. Likewise, the amount he would have given me for personal expenses has been included. Take it. It is a fair sum. Whatever is left after you and Alys are safely fixed should go to Gillian."

Hob took the purse, a velvet and doeskin pouch. Worked in dark gold was the motto, *Mucro Mors Cristo*.

"I should like Gillian to have the purse also. She does not understand, but someday she may. Perhaps the motto will help her to come to that understanding and to forgive me."

Hob drew a deep shuddering breath. His blue eyes searched Brian's face. "To tell the truth. I do not understand either," he admitted. "But I will not argue. You are the knight."

"Yes, I am." Brian turned away.

Brian ordered a supper served to him and Gillian in Stephen's room that evening. Before the food was brought, he arranged for hot baths before the fire. When Gillian came, he was waiting for her, garbed only in a robe of forest green wool.

"My lady." He knelt to her. "Tomorrow I go to fight for king and country."

She smiled uncertainly. Clearly he wanted her to play a part. Although she hated the thought of his going, she could not change his intent. If he wanted this scene, she would do her best for him. "My lord."

Rising, he drew her into his arms to kiss her. He kissed her hair, her eyes, her cheeks, her lips. His tongue caressed the interior of her mouth arousing her while his hands moved over her body. When she was shivering with need, he stood her away from him. "Now I shall undress you."

With tormenting slowness, he drew each garment from her body. As he cast each aside, he kissed the soft skin he revealed, teasing her unmercifully with teeth and lips and tongue.

"Brian," she sobbed, "oh, Brian."

"I love you. Gillian. I love you so."

Her naked body melted in his arms, her legs so weak they would not bear her weight. With a sad smile he lifted her. "Time for your bath."

Standing her in the small tub, he dipped the sponge in the warm water and laved her gently with its silken caress. The flickering firelight threw its colors over her

pale skin and made it glow through the clear water. Like a man worshiping a goddess, he touched her satin smoothness, the swelling of her breasts, the trimness of her waist and hips, the golden curl of hair at the jointure of her thighs. On each of these he pressed his lips, his own body swelling with love.

At last he dried her body with a clean linen towel and surveyed her as a sculptor might survey his greatest handiwork. "Now to bed." He lifted her again holding her tightly against his chest. He slipped her in between clean white sheets and pulled the covers only to her waist. "To await me," he whispered.

Swiftly, he pulled off his robe and stepped into the tub. Catching up a rougher sponge than the one he had used for her, he scoured his body, repeatedly rinsing it until finally he was satisfied with the cleansing.

As she watched him, Gillian realized he was performing a ritual, the ancient purification ceremony preceding the battle. When his skin was glowing, he lifted a bucket of warm water and poured it over himself, letting it sluice down over his face and body. Stepping out, he dried carefully.

At last when she was trembling uncontrollably with desire at the sight of his magnificently muscled nude body, he was satisfied. His face, which had been serious throughout the bathing, now smiled. Purposefully, he strode toward her, his expression relaxed yet eager, his manhood hard.

Beside the bed he paused, one hand on the post, gazing down at her, looking his fill at her white skin, her wavy mass of honey-gold hair, her pale pink nipples stiffened with desire and crowning her swelling breasts. "You are so beautiful," he breathed. With the other hand he

uncovered her lower body, allowing the sight of its perfection to rouse him to even greater heights of desire until he was hard as metal.

"My lord"—she faltered—"will you come into me?" As though she pleaded for his love, she raised her arms and spread her thighs, arching her bosom upward.

"Gillian!" With a cry of delight he positioned himself and slid into her welcoming body. Thereafter, he rode her silently. As each lunge was fiercely delivered, each withdrawal was punctuated with kisses assuring her of his eternal love.

At last when they could no longer bear the bliss, they came together in a shuddering climax. Brian cried her name aloud, his body stiffening in that ecstasy which was like the end of everything and yet the beginning. Gillian clasped him to her with legs and arms. Her open mouth she pressed against his shoulder hiding her face against his neck, so he would not see her tears.

They arose together at dawn. She dressed in her men's clothes and then assisted him to garb himself for war. Only the plate armor would be carried on the back of his saddle.

Silently, she buckled on his sword, her eyes glistening with tears. 'Twas the last step in the ritual. He was ready. Face to face they stared into each other's eyes. From around his neck he lifted the golden medallion she knew so well. It was a part of him. Whenever they made love it struck her breasts; she had kissed it often in her passion. Now he placed it around her neck. "I give you my life, my love, and my honor. With this token I wed you in the sight of God."

With a cry of pain she broke. "You fool! You magnificent, honorable fool! How can you throw away what we have? What are those two miserable people up there in that solar that you should expiate their sins? Suppose your mother lied. She lied to your father all these years. I doubt if she knows the truth herself. They are both deranged with grief and hatred. Brian . . ." She fell to her knees. "Do not go! Come with me to England. You can be whatever you want to be."

His eyes longed for her, his mouth softened. For a moment he wavered. Then the expression was gone. "Farewell, my lady. I go to fight for the king." He turned on his heel and left her sobbing brokenly.

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

"And you could not dissuade him?" Alys stared at the purse Hob weighed in his hand.

"He goes to die. For him honor is everything. Both Gil and I knew the destruction his mother wrought when she told him he was a bastard. His unsullied name has meant everything. He is like a Galahad, an Arthur, a Roland. Despite all the troubles he has gotten himself into, he still believes that people are essentially honorable and good."

Alys smiled up at the squire. "His true friends have done nothing to disavow him of that notion."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "I am not good, Lady Alys."

"Nor I, but I am not so deep-dyed in evil that I cannot admire it and recognize it when I see it."

Hob stared at the pouch, then thrust it back under his tunic. "I must go," he muttered. "Gil is with Brian now."

He will be well cared for. Get a good night's sleep. We must rise in the morning early. I want to be away from this ruin as soon as possible. No good can come of remaining here."

"The chatelaine is obviously deranged. Her husband is a cripple according to Gil. He is near to death. She controls everything." He shrugged his shoulders. "Who can say? Best be on our way to England as quickly as may be."

"I thank you for coming to me with this news." Alys walked with him to the door of her room. There she leaned against the facing as he swung it open. Smiling sweetly, she crossed her arms across her chest. "Get a good rest."

Hob paused in the doorway regarding her fair form speculatively. Faint dark smudges still remained under her eyes, and her skin had a fragile translucent quality. Not only her courage but her physical strength had been sorely tried since she had thrown herself on the mercy of strangers. He was a man, with a man's desires; but as his fortunes had fallen, a natural fastidiousness as well as a certain snobbishness had forbade him to seek release with wenches from the taverns and whores from the army's tail.

Tentatively, fearful of frightening her, he raised his hand to touch her cheek. The rough tan fingers looked strange against the pearly skin. Her gaze remained steady at his touch. Encouraged, he allowed his thumb to trace the corner of her mouth and the indentation of a dimple next to it.

Her breathing altered slightly and her arms dropped away to her sides. Mesmerized by his touch, she allowed her eyelids to veil the ardent response.

Emboldened by the reactions he knew so well, he

trailed his fingers down the side of her cheek until the side of his hand rested under her chin. Pressing his thumb gently to her lower lip, he tilted up her face. Carefully he searched for some sign of revulsion or fear.

None was forthcoming. Instead she seemed to be waiting for him. Gently he touched her lips with his own. They were sweet as he had imagined they would be. He felt a powerful surge of desire. His other arm went round her waist drawing her to him. He felt her arms encircle his neck.

As he lifted her against him, he stepped backward pushing the door closed with a nudge of his shoulder. Her soft breasts pressed against him through the material of her garments. He could feel her nipples hardening. Suddenly, he wanted to see them. He wanted this woman badly.

To take her against her will would destroy the camaraderie of the journey. With just the three of them, he did not dare to create hostility. Dizzily, he held her at arms length. "Alys," he began huskily, "I am a man, my lady, with a man's desires. I must . . ."

She smiled winningly, her hands caressing the back of his neck. "Of course, you are. I know you must. And I am a woman. And I have been without a man for longer than I care to remember. I am not even sure I remember how this is done."

He grinned at her. "Allow me to be your teacher, lady."

As he informed her later, she needed very little instruction. Alys had spent her younger days arousing an old man. If she failed to arouse him, she would be beaten. Her skills brought Hob quickly to a heartstopping climax. Because he had been used to taking the lead in love-



making, he was unprepared for the pleasure she brought him to. Wildly, he writhed beneath her eager lips and knowing hands until he lost control and exploded helplessly like an untried youth.

Later, when he had recovered himself, he repaid her with a long slow titillation of her senses until she was moaning and panting for release. When he sheathed himself within her, her cries of pleasure and gratitude rang out in the still room.

"I have never known such pleasure," Alys admitted later as they lay together in her bed. Naked beside him, her hands woven behind her head, she allowed him free access to her body, reveling in his gentle caresses. No one had ever touched her in such a manner. Her breasts had only been mauled and bruised by her husband. Never had someone kissed and admired them. Tears trickled from the corners of her eyes at the thought of so many wasted years of pain and degradation.

Hob lay with his cheek against her belly, his hands clasping her rounded hips. "You were made for pleasure," he whispered, his breath tickling her so that she stirred and arched slightly. "What a terrible life you must have led. Yet how lucky I am."

"What do you mean?" she asked amazed.

"I have never been made love to like that before. Never has a woman set about so purposefully and skillfully to bring me to pleasure. I could not control myself. You were the mistress in all things."

She blushed. "I am glad you were pleased."

"Pleased." He raised himself on his elbows to stare into her eyes. "I am in heaven. I am in ecstasy." Complimenting her extravagantly, he began to rain kisses over her bare flesh while she giggled and twisted with

pleasure at the tickling of his lips and breath.

So they passed the night, alternately sleeping and waking to make love joyously.

When Hob finally woke to daylight streaming in the window, he found Alys sitting up in bed, staring at nothing. "What are you thinking?"

She smiled. "I am thinking how wonderful it will be to look back on this as well as any other times we may steal. These lovely memories will sustain me for the rest of my life in my nephew's house, or wherever I go."

Rolling over on his side, he propped himself up on his elbow. His chunky frame, laced with scars and covered with a thick mat of coarse blond hair, could by no means be called handsome. While he was slipping gracefully into middle age, he was not the fair-skinned youth he had once been. He sighed. "I regret that such as I would be the stuff of your memories, Alys."

She looked at him frankly, then she smiled again. "You are much more than I ever dreamed, Hob. Believe me. I am so happy." Gently, she bent to kiss him on the mouth. Then drew hastily away. "We must go. Gil will be searching for us. No doubt he has garbed Sir Brian for his war. We must go and bid him farewell and good luck."

Brian had already departed when they descended. Instead the chatelaine of La Forêt confronted them. Her face reminded Alys of an ancient apple that had somehow escaped being eaten during the long winter. Lipless, her eyes reduced to glittering slits, she concealed the rest of her body completely, even wearing a black wimple that covered her hair and forehead to the eyebrows.

Whereas the night they had first seen her she had been

cold and still, now her eyes darted everywhere and her taloned hands plucked nervously at the air. "He has gone like a fool!"

Hob choked with anger at her first words. "Are you sure, madam, that you are the mother of that man? Better would I believe him to be a bastard sired by your husband and foisted on you. None of your blood could ever be anything but evil."

A slight smile flashed across the mummy face and as quickly disappeared. "Think you not, impudent wretch?"

"*I know* not, madam." He bowed slightly. "I come to tell you that the three of us will depart as soon as may be."

"By your leave, madam," Alys interposed. "I thank you for your hospitality. I will leave you now to prepare our packs." Without waiting to be dismissed, Alys hurried back up the stairs.

The woman in black sighed. "You do well to leave immediately. Trenanay is furiously angry. The sight of Brian coupled with the knowledge that he did not sire him has made him mad. He talks incessantly of hellfire and damnation." Her eyes took on a beseeching look.

Without a trace of pity Hob returned her look. "Then if I were you, madam, I would look to my soul. Call a confessor and obtain unction."

She looked away. "I cannot expect unction," she quavered. "I am not sorry for my sins."

"Then God pity you, madam," Hob said as he, too, turned to go.

"Sir!"

He stopped, his hand on the door.

"Send the young man who accompanied my son yesterday. I would have words with him."

"Gil Fletcher. I do not know whether he will come. But I will deliver your message."

"What can that witch want with me?"

"Do not go," Alys advised. "She only wants to wound and insult. She has no pity for either father or son. What a monster!" She shook her head as if she had difficulty in believing what she had witnessed.

Gil looked to Hob for guidance. The squire shrugged. "If you wish, Gil, then go. Otherwise, we will leave immediately." The three started down the stairs together. Halfway down, a servant met them.

He bowed courteously to Gil and addressed her in labored English. "My lady bids you wait upon her, if you please. She bade me tell you she will require only a few minutes of your time so as not to delay your departure."

Gil glanced questioningly at Hob, who shrugged his shoulders. "We will wait for you," was all he said.

"Please, sir."

"Oh, very well." Although she dreaded the encounter, her curiosity was aroused. She followed the servant back up the staircase and into another wing of the château.

At last the man knocked on a door at the end of a long hall. After a brief moment, he opened it and stepped back obsequiously. The familiar cracked voice invited her into the room. "Wait without, Cavilon," she instructed the servant.

Gil stepped into a room remarkable in the Château de la Forêt for its color and light. On three sides were windows that looked out over the forest, while the heavy old furnishings were draped and cushioned with bright blues and greens. Seated in a heavy curule chair before

an embroidery frame was Brian's mother. Like raven's wings, her black garments fluttered around her as she gestured to Gil to come closer.

"My son appears to have more than a passing affection for you," she sneered.

Concealing her surprise that the woman knew English, Gil clamped her jaws tightly. One part of her longed to set the record straight about the relationship between Brian and her. On the other hand, she could not be sure that the fact she was a woman, traveling in men's clothes, posing as a boy, would really improve this woman's opinion. Furthermore, she did not really care what they thought, she decided. Silently, she waited.

The woman gestured impatiently. "Come closer."

Gil crossed to the windows.

"In the light you are not ill favored." The gold-flecked eyes glittered. "So much for my son's chances of fathering. 'Tis probably as well." She stared out across the forest.

Gil cleared her throat. "I assume you did have some purpose in bringing me here," she remarked with exaggerated politeness.

The chatelaine shrugged. "Yes, I suppose so. Yes." After a moment's hesitation, she pointed with an index finger, frightfully crippled with arthritis. "Open yonder chest and bring the small casket you find hidden in it under the blankets."

Puzzled, Gil did as she was bidden. The blankets were old and musty-smelling with signs of powdery mildew in their creases. Brushing them aside with a wary hand, she uncovered a small ornately carved casket, studded with small blue stones and inlaid with gold.

"Bring it here," the chatelaine grumbled impatiently.

Gil set it on the small table at her right hand and stepped back.

With hands that fumbled and shook slightly, the woman opened the lock and lifted the lid. The interior, lined with green velvet, contained several pouches made of the same material. Gently, the taloned fingers brushed the soft stuff. The wrinkled face flushed slightly as if precious memories flooded into her mind which had been kept locked as tightly as the chest had been.

"Sit down," she rasped, indicating a chair beneath a window. "Pull that thing over here, so I can show you."

When Gil had obeyed, the lady of La Forêt lifted the first pouch and pulled it open. "Hold out your hand." Twenty gold pieces slid warmly onto her palm. At Gil's astonished expression, the lady cackled. "Part of my marriage dot. I kept a portion of it back, in hope that some day I might be able to leave here. But I never did." She tossed the empty pouch onto Gil's lap. "Now put them back in."

Puzzled, Gil slipped the heavy gold coins back inside the velvet and drew the string.

"Now, these"—the lady opened another pouch—"were given me by my mother. She loved pretty things and my father was very extravagant. He loved to dress her in elegant clothing and jewels and parade her around for all the nobles in Normandy to see. She was a beauty and he was rich. They had a fair exchange." She held up a necklace, two matching bracelets, and a ring of gold all set with magnificent baroque pearls. "I never really cared for these," she sniffed, handing them in turn to Gil to put back in their pouch. "Pearls make me think of fish. But my mother was stunningly beautiful in them."

Brian's mother opened two more pouches containing

sets of jewels, one of rubies and one of dark green jade, which she declared to be the most valuable of all. "Do you know where jade comes from, foolish boy?" she snapped. Before Gil could shake her head, she began to explain. "From Cathay. All the way from Cathay. And the darker green, the more expensive and rare it is. These gems are very, very rare. Worth a king's ransom as the romances say."

She handed away each in turn, then came to the last pouch. "These are my jewels," she said bitterly. Ripping open the last green pouch she emptied the contents onto the table. A simple betrothal ring, a marriage ring, and a small gold medallion clattered onto its hard surface. She laughed softly. Scooping up the rings onto the ends of her fingers, she waved them at Gil. "These Trenanay gave me." Contemptuously, she allowed them to drop into Gil's hand from off her fingers. "And this," she held up the medallion, "was given me by the man who was Brian's father. There is a name on it. But that name remains with me only. Brian has no need of either of these two men. Neither was particularly good. But at least one was preferable to the other."

Still clutching the medallion to her breast, she handed the casket to Gillian. "Put all the pouches back in and take the casket."

"Yes, lady. Where shall I take it?"

The woman looked disgusted. "With you, you fool."

Gillian almost dropped the box. Her mouth gaped open. "Why?"

"Good God! Do you want me to say it? Or are you really that stupid? Because you are my son's love. Because I have hurt him irreparably. Because I wish to make amends in some small way. I would give these

things to his wife, but he will probably not live to have one. So I give them to you." Her voice was a rasping quaver.

"B-But you think . . . that is . . . you know I am a . . . boy."

"And I am an adulteress. What stones have I to throw at you? Perversion is no new thing in this old, corrupt world."

Gillian stared aghast.

The chatelaine coughed deeply, her fist containing the gold medallion pressed tightly against her chest. "Get out. . . . Take your hoard and go!"

Faintly nauseous, Gillian headed for the door.

"Wait!" The old voice was only a breath of sound. Gillian froze, her scalp prickling. "If Brian should by some miracle survive, he will come to you. I know it. Tell him . . ." The silence was pregnant.

"What shall I tell him?"

Then a sigh. "Tell him what you will. . . ."

Gillian closed the door quietly behind her.

"You must go quickly, sir." The servant Caviion touched Gillian's arm. "No. Not that way. The Sire de Trenanay has already placed guards at the main doors."

"But my friends . . ."

"They have been escorted ahead of you."

Suspicious, yet having no choice, Gillian clutched the casket tightly under her arm. "Where are you taking me?"

"If *m'sieur* will please follow closely. The way is somewhat tedious here. We must go carefully, yet swiftly."

Fearfully, Gil stared around her at the cobwebs festooning the dark low passage. Only the servant's candle lighted the way. "Where are you taking me?" she



demanded. "I . . ."

"*S'il vous plaît, m'sieur*, bend very low."

Scuttling along in a crouch, following the servant's lead, the walls closing in around her, she could do little but obey his instructions. Suppose the sire had planned this. Would she be knocked in the head and buried down here? With her free hand, she felt for Brian's medallion dangling between her breasts inside her smock.

Poor Brian! What a terrible experience! Poor Gil! And Hob and Alys perhaps lying dead somewhere ahead. She shuddered.

The servant came to a small door.

She heard the clinking of a chain, the rattle of a bolt. A small door only about three feet high was dragged inward.

"Go, *m'sieur*." She squeezed past him and out into the dim light of a grove of trees.

"Hob! Alys!"

Hob swung her horse around for her. "Mount up, Gil. We must ride fast. The Sire de Trenanay wants to kill us."

Gillian caught hold of the reins. "But why? We have done nothing."

"The sire is shamed," Alys explained. "He wants no one to spread the word that Brian is not his son. Caviion told me that only he among the household staff knows the real truth. He fears for his own life but will not leave his mistress." She regarded Gil curiously. "What have you there?"

Gil unfastened her pack from the back of the saddle and unrolled it. Carefully she placed the jewel casket within it and retied the straps. "The most amazing thing has happened. . . ."

"Save it," Hob advised. "We must escape."

Springing into the saddle, Gillian wheeled her mount to follow the other two. Silently, they walked their horses among the dark trees. A heavy stand of evergreens with long needles had dropped a thick mat over the forest floor, effectively muffling the sounds of passage. No birds called from the branches. Once they heard the stirring of some small creature. Once a group of mounted men rode by some distance away, but they were screened from view.

They rode for more than two hours before Hob called a halt to rest the horses. "What did the old witch want to see you about?" he asked.

Gil shook her head. "She feared for her soul, I suppose. She gave me some of Brian's heritage."

"Poor Brian," Hob said softly.

"What a terrible family!" Alys agreed.

Her comment ended the conversation. They sat silent until at last Hob signaled them to move on.

Bringing up the rear as they rode onward, Gillian imagined once or twice that she could smell smoke.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

"Do you know where we are?"

Hob smiled wearily. "Our exact location, no. These forests are thick and stretch for miles. As you may have observed, one tree looks much the same as the next."

Gil perked an eyebrow in Alys's direction. "At least we shall be jolly though lost."

"However," the squire interrupted her sarcasm, "I do know the direction we should be traveling in. *Et voilà!* We are traveling north and west."

"Toward?"

"The channel, what else?"

"Of course, the channel. And when we arrive we will easily ride our horses in and let them swim across."

Hob grinned. "If you prefer to swim your horse across, Gil, you may do so. Knowing your aversion to sea travel, I can imagine that you would. However, Lady Alys and I,

less adventurous creatures, will take ship at Dieppe for England."

Gillian laughed. "I have a much greater aversion to drowning, sir. I shall take ship with you although 'twill be a frightful experience. I swear that once home in England, I shall think carefully before bathing."

Alys swayed in her saddle. They had been riding with only short stops for rest since leaving the château. Hob guided his horse back to her. "About ready to rest for the evening?" He patted her hands where they crossed on the horse's withers.

"Oh, I can continue." Alys sat up straight and smiled at him alertly. "I am fine. The good night's rest at the château gave me much strength. Truly."

Gil, too, guided her horse to ride beside Alys. "Well, I am wretchedly weary and sore. Horses are another thing I shall regard doubtfully once I get home to York."

"I was hoping we would come out of the woods and find somewhere to spend the night," Hob told them. "But I fear we will have to sleep on the ground. Without fresh water."

"We can ride on," Alys protested. "I can . . ."

Hob flung up his hand for silence as a distant drumming of hoofbeats interrupted the conversation. Gillian and Alys both looked at him in alarm. Motioning them to follow him, he reined his horse round and led off in the direction of the sound.

The forest began to thin. The trees were farther apart; the underbrush was thicker. Although it presented no problem for the horses, the soft muffling qualities of the pine needles were replaced by rustling and crackling as the mounts breasted the scrub. Through the trees wound a gray road and beyond it a dark river.

Hob raised his arm and pointed. "Unless I miss my guess, 'tis the Bethune."

Gillian came up beside him. "You really do know the country," she commented admiringly.

He eased himself in the saddle, his tiredness showing in the deep lines on his face and the droop of his shoulders. "I rode all over Flanders, Artois, and Picardy with the cavalry some twenty years ago," he acknowledged. "I will admit 'twas easier then. I was younger. 'Twas then I learned to speak the language."

The sounds of horsemen approaching roused him to alertness. "Back into the trees," he commanded.

Immediately, Alys turned her horse and cantered away.

Gil hesitated. Hob was not moving. "Hob?"

"Go on, my lady," he urged. "I shall parley with these people. If they be good honest men, mayhap they will allow us to journey with them. My guess is that they are, since they ride openly taking no care to go quietly."

"And if they should not be?"

"Then you and Alys are safe."

"I will stand my ground with you."

He had not time to argue. Four horsemen appeared in the deepening twilight. At the sight of the two ahead of them, they slowed their mounts to a walk. A look of incredulity spread over Hob's face as they approached.

Their garments were ordinary enough, being merely black cloth jackets which came down over their black hose. Although each wore a badge, the day was already too far done to discern its inscription. But strung over the shoulder and across the chest of each one was a fine yew bow. One's head was bare, but the other three wore conical hats familiar to every Englishman.

"By God!" Hob exclaimed. "Mounted archers. What cheer, lads?" He raised his voice at the same time he urged his horse toward them.

"English?" came the incredulous exclamation.

"Right. Howard of Rothingham." Hob clasped arms with the first archer who grinned through a grizzled beard.

"Nicholas Warrenby from Winchelsea. What do ye here so far from home?"

"Esquire to Sir Brian de Trenanay until he released me from his service. I will not fight against good English lads." Hob shook hands round with the other three before motioning for Gil to come forward.

"Here is Master Gil Fletcher from York Minster, one of the finest fletchers in the north parts as well as bowman master."

Nicholas Warrenby cast a calculating eye at Gil's slender form. "Mayhap you'd be willin' to replace one of the good lads that died in this wretched land," he suggested.

Hob held up his hand before Gillian could speak. "Gil is just a boy, Master Warrenby. He is a good archer, true, but you and I both know too many good archers who have not the stomach for fighting."

Nicholas made no reply to Hob's observation, but changed the subject. "Where be ye bound?"

"For the port at Dieppe there to take ship back to England. Gil and I are accompanied by Gil's old father who even now waits in the woods. Fetch him, Gil."

The mounted archer grinned. "The English army crossed the bridge at Arques this very day. The Castellan was so terrified of Young Harry that he provided us with bread and wine. Tonight we enjoy the feast, and

tomorrow we march on for Calais. At least join us for the meal."

Hob looked doubtful until Gil rode up with Alys drooping miserably in the saddle. Her posture, her matted whitened hair, her general air of despair and exhaustion changed his mind. "With pleasure, Master Warrenby."

The camp of Henry V on the north side of the Bethune was a scene of confusion. Four days march from Harfleur had brought them almost a third of the distance to Calais. Resistance had been encountered at three towns and summarily disposed of with almost no losses. Though the weather was unseasonably hot and muggy, the French wine made all things bearable.

Nicholas himself showed them a place to unroll their gear and bed down for the night before inviting them to sup with men in his own troop of mounted archers. The black-garbed men dispensed with their weapons and leather caps and lounged at ease round the watch fire.

"Was Harfleur a long seige?" Hob wanted to know.

"Just over three weeks," Nicholas growled. "Long enough to get everybody sick with the damned trots. We've lost more to dysentery than to the French. The Earl of Suffolk, himself that was so strong, turned up his toes. Duke Clarence, the king's own brother, is terrible weakened."

"Aye," one of Nicholas's troop observed. "Likely to die in the winter, he is. That kind of thing really runs a man down."

"We'd still be lying there up to our ankles in our own filth were it not for us miners," a man squatting on the outside of the circle avowed.

Nicholas rolled his eyes to the heavens. "You miners,"

he sneered. "Dig a trench, and the French dug another one right opposite and blocked yours up. We'd have been there 'til doomsday if we'd waited for you."

The miner looked hurt. He rose to his feet with injured dignity. "The king could never have got his guns in place without us."

Nicholas relented. "Why right you are on that score!" He grinned at Gillian. "I warrant you'd like to have been there, lad, to hear 'The King's Daughter' open up. Knocked the walls right down she did. She and 'The Messenger.'"

Gillian nodded uncertainly. "But what about the people inside the town . . . and the soldiers. Were many of them killed?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Only if they was dumb enough to stick their heads over the walls and out from behind the screens. Cannons like those big gunnys are for knocking stones out of walls."

"And was the king ordering the cannons?"

"Why, bless him, he was! Hardly slept did Young Harry. I recollect one night when I was standing guard, he come by me. Right handsome man he is, hair shaved up the back of his neck just like his men. He asks me my name, and I tells him right out, 'Nicholas Warrenby, Your Majesty.'"

"What do you call me when I am not standing before you, Nicholas,' he says."

"Well, before I thought, I blurted right out, 'Young Harry, Your Majesty.'"

"To make a difference between me and my father, Old Harry,' he says."

"I was that upset. I didn't know what he might do to me, but he just laughs sort of quiet like and pats me on



the shoulder. I nodded my head. 'I was with your father at Shrewsbury,' I says, 'when I was a young man.'"

"Then we are brothers,' he says. 'I wonder how many more are here today that were at Shrewsbury.' He tucks his head and walks on with his hands behind him, like he's thinkin' about it and rememberin'."

The miner snorted. "Every time Nicholas tells that tale it gets longer. Before long King Henry will have invited him to sup."

"How did you finally get in?" Hob pressed. Battlewise himself, he knew enough to discount many soldiers' tall tales. The truth was under all the embellishment. But one had to keep searching for it.

"The gunners kept poundin' away at the barbican," Nicholas explained.

"Nearly every gun," another man added excitedly. "Whoo-ee! The noise was something fierce. We all had padding from our jackets stuffed in our ears."

"Well, the French saw we were about to knock it down, so they came charging out, riding right for the gun emplacements. And it was cut and hack. I don't mind tellin' you it was pretty bloody there for a few minutes."

Gillian turned pale. "I should not like to see men killed, or to be forced to kill one myself."

"But they're French, lad," Nicholas insisted. "French."

"I know," Gillian tucked her head, thinking of Brian. Sharp pain lanced through her at the memory of their love. Where was he tonight? Was he thinking of her, regretting the loss of her as bitterly as she regretted the forces that pulled them apart? Or . . . she closed her eyes as the pain stabbed deeper . . . was he lying wounded or dead in some lonely field? And why? The innocent recipient of his parents' vengeance.

Nicholas continued the story. "When they came chargin' out, 'course that's when we came in. Right, lads?" He looked round him at his grinning troop. They had all heard the story many times before, but like children, they loved to hear it again.

"We came galloping up on our horses and let fly with a steady stream of arrows. They hardly touched those gunners. We was too strong for them. The French can't stomach English broadheads. And that's a fact."

Hob saluted them all with the jug of wine that they had passed him. "Right!" he exclaimed. "I remember a yeoman archer who used to ride with my father. Tough man. Could let loose a half a dozen arrows while you blinked, and hit a man's thumb at three hundred yards. He liked peacock feathers for fletching," Hob remarked aside to Gil.

"Peacock's good," Nicholas nodded, "but duck's the best."

"Get on with the story, Nick," someone urged.

"That I will, lads. Just let me wet my throat." Nicholas accepted the jug hastily offered by Hob and turned it up, drinking noisily. "As I was saying . . . The French comes chargin' out and we rides to meet them. There was several groups of us, but the main one was led by young Johnny Holland. He yells 'Huntingdon! A Huntingdon!' for that was his father, you know. We all knows he's our leader and follows him. Right over the barbican . . ."

At this juncture one of the troop extended his feet toward Gil to show how his boots were charred. "Like runnin' through hell," he nodded seriously.

". . . across the barbican and it blazin' away, through the rubble in the moat, and over the palisade . . ." Nicholas's hands made wild gestures to mime slipping

and sliding and climbing.

"They knew we was in," said the man with burned boots. "They started hollerin' for peace."

"That they did," Nicholas declared. "That they did. And we won through." He looked around with a satisfied grin and took another long drink of wine.

The little group around the watch fire had grown as more and more came to hear Nicholas's story. The wine was passed around again and again.

Gillian began to feel dizzy. Her nose felt numb at the very tip as did her lips. "Wha's wrong wi' me?" she whispered to Hob.

He grinned at her. "You are drunk, Gil. Mayhap you had better find your way to our place and roll up beside Alys."

She shook her head. "I'll jus' not drink anymore. But, oh, Hob, 'tis exciting. I jus' can't go bed."

Someone broke into a ribald song about an archer and a lass who liked him to draw his bow and shoot straight. Gillian turned bright red but held her ground.

Again Hob questioned Nicholas. "Why are you heading for Calais?" He looked around him. "You *are* heading for Calais I assume."

A silky voice broke in between the squire and Gillian. "*Chevauchée*, my dear Hob, and dear Gil too. How amusing and amazing!"

"Ranulf!" Gil leaped to her feet in terror. The alcohol fumes vanished from her brain as if they had never been. The mellow evening had become suddenly dark with menace.

Ranulf caught her arm and steadied her. "Ah, my little fletcher." He laughed. Before Hob's tired, slightly drunken brain could function, Ranulf had dragged her

away from the fire.

Despite her desperate struggles in the darkness, Ranulf's hands were like manacles of steel around her wrists. "Be still!" he snarled, his breath hot in her ear. "Otherwise I tear that smock off you and expose you as the whore you are. These men are drunk. What do you think will become of you if they discover you are female?"

The threat, coupled with the pain in her wrists where Ranulf squeezed them, subdued her. Ranulf herded her farther away into the darkness. Behind them he heard Hob's alarmed voice. "This way, Hob," he called.

As the squire thudded up to them, Ranulf held Gillian tightly against his chest. "That is quite far enough," he warned. "Her bones are so fragile. Just a small amount of pressure could crack one or maybe both of them in each wrist. So painful."

Hob flexed his muscles, groaning at his own failure to look out for her.

Ranulf grinned. "Why not just wander back over to where Master Warrenby is embroidering his tales?" he invited. "He is quite entertaining. I have heard his stories. In fact this little march has been quite boring except for old Nick. That is, until tonight," he finished silkily.

"Let her go!" Hob grated.

"Moan for him, dear girl," Ranulf whispered, giving her wrists a vicious twist. Agonizing pain shot through her as she bent double under his hands. A small cry sprang from her mouth as sweat popped out on her forehead.

"Not quite a moan," Ranulf mocked her. "We might

have to practice on that. Be off with you, Hob. I promise not to hurt her more than she can bear. She will be quite all right on the morrow. I just want to spend a part of my evening with her, renewing old acquaintances."

Hob dropped his hands. "I will go back to the fire on one condition."

Ranulf waited, never relaxing his grip on Gillian's wrists.

"You must stay here, where I can see the two of you talking."

Ranulf drew a deep mocking sigh. "Oh, very well. But I swear I was not going to savage her. Not here. Not a valuable bowman like her. But you must leave us alone, Hob. Otherwise, I shall be forced to reveal her identity to the men of this camp. Most of them like a wench from the army's tail . . . not being so fastidious as I."

Slowly Hob withdrew, leaving Gillian alone in the dark with the man who had paid good money to have her dropped into the channel. As the squire went back toward the fire, Ranulf eased his hold on her wrists. "Straighten up, my dear. If you give me your promise you will do nothing stupid, I will even release your wrists."

In a voice tight with pain Gillian promised.

Instantly, his hands fell away. Quickly she turned to face him, backing a step away from him. He raised his hands with palms up. "Peace, I swear."

"You do not know the meaning of the word."

"Peace?"

"No. Swear."

He chuckled. His eyes glittered in the dark as he assessed her figure up and down. "You look much the worse for wear," he said at last. "And skinnier too. I felt

you. All knobs and bones."

Gillian said nothing. Nervous rigors racked her body. Only the fear of what he could do to her by exposing her sex made her able to stand and face him.

"I must admit that I was amazed to see you. At first I did not recognize you. I could not believe my eyes."

"I am not surprised. You must have thought the dead w-were walking." Gil's teeth chattered so that she could hardly speak.

"Cold?" Ranulf questioned softly. "But 'tis a warm night."

Something very like a sob escaped her. "I have done you no harm. Not ever," she quavered.

Ranulf appeared to be considering. He placed one hand on his hip while the other he lifted to lay alongside his cheek. "Well, in one sense, I suppose you have not. But in another. Oh, Gil—by the way, what is your real name?"

"Gillian Fletcher?"

"Gillian. Pretty. As I was saying, in one sense you have not, but in other ways, you have done me many disservices. For example, Wat has left me."

Gillian did not know what to say. The tone of Ranulf's last sentence was different from the mocking silky sound that he usually adopted. There was a touch of sincere sadness.

Ranulf drew a deep breath. "Yes, Wat left me. And took Hereward with him."

Following a moment of awkward silence, during which the sounds of the camp seemed to move farther and farther away, Gillian cleared her throat. "I am very sorry," she said huskily. "Friends are rare."

"Ah, yes." Ranulf's voice was angry. "Friends are rare

and hard to come by. So are lovers," he added significantly.

"But surely you cannot blame me for their leaving." Gillian raised her hand in a gesture of appeal. "I had nothing to do with Wat, and I did not even know the other man."

"If you had not interrupted my pleasure with Brian, I would have quickly dispensed with him and gone on to pay proper attention to Wat and Hereward. As it was, they became jealous of my interest in him and sought solace in each other."

Gillian gasped, too amazed at his statement to be afraid. "That is the most twisted piece of reasoning I have ever heard."

Ranulf laughed. "Yes, it is. I rather pride myself on thinking of things like that. But people like you will have to have explanations for my behavior. I simply think up outrageous ones. The real reason is that I do things because I want to. The idea occurs to me. It tickles my fancy, and I do it."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Gillian, the truth is that I am without a single person whom I feel real affection for. In fact, I hardly know anyone. The young man I was . . . er . . . traveling with on the *Catherine* caught this terrible dysentery and died in agony. I was prepared to be bored for a long time. These soldiers are such louts, no delicacy, no sensitivity. And then I saw you."

"But I am a female."

"I know, dear. But you are so easy to tease and torment. It will quite take my mind off the boredom of the trip. So I want you to bid good-bye to that lout, Hob. Send him on his way to join the king's troops. They all

need squires over there. So many poor lads dead, you know."

Gillian felt a sick helplessness. "And come with you?" she gasped.

"Exactly." Ranulf smiled delightedly. "See how quick and intelligent you are. You will provide me no end of pleasure."



## Chapter Thirty-Three

"Ah, the *chevauchée*," Ranulf declaimed over his shoulder to Gillian. At his instructions she now rode as a good servant should, slightly behind him on his left.

"What, Ranulf?" Her eyes restlessly searched the horizon. Since he talked almost constantly for the sheer joy of listening to his own ravings, she had decided to pay as little attention to him as possible.

He pulled his horse, waited for her to come abreast, and then rapped her smartly with his leather thong. The lash slapped her thigh and forearm both thickly covered in the archer's black padded jacket. "Pay attention to me, Gillian," he commanded angrily. "I was extolling the virtues of the *chevauchée*, both as a tool of war in the hands of our good King Henry, and as an opportunity for clever men to turn a profit."

While the lash had not even stung through her thick

clothing, the humiliation of being struck without being able to retaliate infuriated Gillian. She bent on him a look of utmost loathing. "You mean as an opportunity for looting, do you not?"

"Nonsense. The French are our enemies." He smiled blandly as he patted a heavy purse which he had taken great pleasure in showing her the first night of their enforced companionship.

"The king considers that these are his subjects," she reminded him stiffly. "He has issued stiff rules for their protection. 'No man shall rob either merchant, vitaler, surgeon, nor barber.'"

"Very well recited," he sneered scathingly. "But keep your mouth shut around the marshal, or your little secret will be out also. Remember."

"I will," she nodded angrily. Defiance stiffened her spine. "But you put away that lash, or I will tell. If you try to hurt me too much, I might decide that others would be kinder to me than you."

Suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed. His teeth were very white, and the eyeteeth, very sharp. He reminded her of a fox. His dark eyes flashed as he smiled. "Threats. Ah, Gillian. What a pleasure it is to match wits with you. Your tongue is most acerbic, my little fletcher. Are you sure you are not really a boy disguised as a girl disguised as a boy?"

She shot him a fulminating look.

"Perhaps I should have those clothes off you tonight to check for sure. I might have been mistaken. Perhaps those protuberances are merely pasted on." He made curving motions with his hands to illustrate the protuberances to which he alluded, then laughed uproariously when she blushed and touched spurs to her

horse's flanks.

She had endured this kind of talk for twenty miles the day the army had left Arques. While waiting their turn to cross at Bresle, he had insisted that they sit together on a grassy bank. There he had regaled her with an explicit description of one of the techniques by which he made love to the men he called his lovers. When she had tried to break away, he had caught hold of her ankle and gripped it tightly while he pinched and stroked her calf.

Remembering her rage and humiliation of yesterday, she seethed with suppressed anger. She had had no opportunity to speak to Hob or Alys after Ranulf had dragged her away. A worried look on her face, Alys had waved at her when she rode across the bridge with the rest of the retainers in the baggage train. Gillian had pasted a big false smile on her face and waved back gaily. No sense in worrying Alys.

Now the sun's heat combined with a pervading stillness to create a sultry, unpleasant day. The archer's heavy black clothing absorbed the sun's rays. Gillian could feel perspiration trickling down her face and steaming out of every pore of her skin. Her whole body was bathed in it, and the rough English wool itched abominably.

Ranulf caught up with her. "The *chevauchée*, as I was saying," he continued as if no interruption had occurred, "is a time-honored military practice. In this case, however, many of the nobles did not want to make it. The king himself knew if practiced as it should be, it was impossible. So we are compromising." He looked at her narrowly to be sure that she was listening.

She sighed. "How are we compromising, Ranulf?"

"Call me 'milord.' We are compromising because we

should be moving from Harfleur to Rouen to Paris thereby conquering France. Instead we are actually moving north toward Calais. The nobles know the king cannot take Paris with only six thousand men. The king knows it too."

As she digested this information, Gillian found herself paying attention to his lecture. "Then why this?" she asked. "Why march through the country following the seacoast? If we are going to take ship at Calais, why not take ship at Harfleur and go home?"

Ranulf rolled his eyes. "Because, you stupid creature, the king cannot just turn around and run home with his tail between his legs like some whipped cur. He must at least *claim* all this land, even if it is the seacoast. He would look like a fool, if he did not."

Gillian grimaced both at the appellation and the explanation. "But we are just riding through it. We cannot change the people. They feel no loyalty to the king just because he rode through their land."

"Right. That is what several of the king's advisors probably told him. But he must make the grand gesture." Ranulf waved his hand emulating the king's grand gesture and then doubled it into a fist. "For the stupidly honest, this march is an exercise in futility. But for the soldier who has any sense it is an opportunity to make himself a tidy profit at the expense, of course, of the nation's enemies."

Gillian looked at him disgustedly. "You are nothing but a thief," she accused.

"Nonsense. I am much more than a thief. I am a lecher, as well, but only for members of my own sex. I do not lust after women, nor do I impregnate them and leave little bastards running around the countryside." He

glanced significantly at Gil's stomach.

"A paragon of virtue . . ."

"*Au contraire*. Have you noticed how much my French is improving? I am a paragon of vices. Shall I continue to enumerate them for you?"

"Why not just ride along silently?" she suggested hopefully. "The day is really too hot for debate."

"You do look rather red in the face, my dear. Are you sure you feel all right?"

She shrugged. In point of fact she felt ill. Vague nausea weakened her insides. The sun beat down on the black leather helmet Ranulf had insisted that she wear until she was sure her brains were frying. She licked her lips, tasting the salt on them.

Suddenly, a cry went up in the line ahead. A small troop of French knights swept out of the trees. Less than a dozen in all, they thundered straight at the line of marching men.

Horried, Gillian stared open-mouthed. The mighty destriers, their foreheads and breasts covered with armor plate, galloped full tilt into the English at the point where the king's standard was displayed.

Ranulf was shouting something in her ear, but she could not understand him, so stunned was she by their frightful killing power. In horror she watched the men break and scatter, fleeing for their very lives. The screams of the wounded beneath the iron lances and swinging maces drove her mad. Shutting her eyes tightly, she covered her ears with her hands.

"Damn it!" Ranulf shouted, grabbing one of her wrists and pulling her hand down. "Use that bow!"

She blinked at him. The screams were awful. The entire line was thrown into confusion. Men and horses

shoved and toppled each other like dominos as the point of the line meant to receive the charge collapsed and fled.

"Damn it!" Ranulf grabbed for the bow. "This! Use this!"

Her mind was a blank, but when her hands closed over the bow, she began to act on instinct. One hand found the arrows at her belt, drawing one. Turning in the saddle to drop the bow alongside her leg, she nocked an arrow into the string.

The French knights had done their worst, charging through the line, killing men not only with weapons, but also in the panicky crush their charge created. Now one of them charged up the center of the road, his great broadsword swinging. The English dived to either side, dodging behind trees and flinging themselves into the underbrush.

Mesmerized, Gillian could not move. Ranulf was screaming in her ear, but her horse's reins were on its neck as she stood upright in the saddle, her bow drawn, the arrow aimed.

Broadsword arcing round his head, the basinet with visor down covering him completely, the knight charged toward her. The men between them dived aside. She could hear Ranulf. She could hear the screaming. Then she could hear nothing. Her thumb was at her ear. Between his breastplate and his gorget was a gap. He had lost the protective seam plate on the right side.

The broadsword whistled in the air. A scarlet mantle fluttered from the basinet. Sighting along the arrow she placed the tip an inch above the gap. She held her breath. Her fingers released. The bowstring twanged.

She heard the fleshy thunk as the shaft buried itself in his body just below the shoulder. The steel broadhead

tore into his chest. He had been leaning forward, but the force drove him backward in the saddle. Only the high cantle saved him from being overset. The broadsword went flying and the convulsive tug of the reins to the right pulled the destrier aside.

Upright on her horse, her fingers automatically reaching for the next arrow, Gillian surveyed the melee on the road. The wounded and dead lay in their blood. The living had scrambled to comparative safety. Some two hundred yards ahead of her the remaining Frenchmen were wheeling their horses to ride back the way they had come.

One separated himself from the group and galloped toward her, lance couched. A blue and gold scarf fluttered from his helmet. A blue and gold enamel medallion shone on his armor. Her arrow was in the string. Even with visor down she knew him. His size, the way he rode the horse were unmistakable. Across the quickly diminishing space behind lance and broadhead, they stared at each other. Suddenly, he raised his lance and swung his mount off to the side.

Following him with her eyes, Gillian saw him intercept the knight she had shot. The knight of the blue and gold scarf retrieved the rein from the neck of the other's horse and led him away.

Other bowmen, recovering from their shock, were following Gillian's example. A hail of arrows bouncing harmlessly off the powerful armor plate on the Frenchmen's backs followed their retreat. The skirmish had lasted less than ten minutes.

All around her, men were climbing back onto the road. Several gathered about her horse, their faces turned up to her. They were speaking. She could see their mouths

moving. Gradually the sense of their words entered her brain.

"Great shooting!"

"That's keeping a cool head, lad."

"Did you see that? Never gave an inch."

"What a shot!"

Ranulf rode up beside her. Silent, his face blank, he relieved her first of the arrow. When his hand touched her fingers curled round the bow, he found them icy cold. Where her face had been flushed from the heat of the day, he found it greenish white, the pupils of her eyes dilated with shock until they almost filled the irises. Ordering the others away, he caught up her reins and led her off the road.

Beneath a tall chestnut whose wide trunk to some degree hid the carnage on the road, he dismounted and held up his arms. "Gillian." His voice was low and surprisingly devoid of mockery. "Gillian."

She blinked again. Remembrance flooded into her eyes. Her body jerked; her hands clenched. She opened her mouth.

"Gillian!" Ranulf placed his hand on her thigh.

"Where is he?" The tears formed in her eyes. "Where?" She looked wildly around her.

Ranulf snapped his fingers to attract her attention, then held up his hands to her. Gratefully, she went into them, throwing her leg over the pommel and allowing him to lift her to ground. But when he tried to stand her on her feet, she collapsed. Her face was hidden in his padded tunic. Her hands clutched at his arms.

His expression embarrassed, he put his arms around her. Uneasily he looked around, but no one was paying any attention to them. "Gillian," he muttered. "Gillian."



Get hold of yourself." He patted her awkwardly.

"Oh, Ranulf. Did you see him?"

"Who? The man you killed? I should say I did. Great shot, Gillian."

"The man I killed!" She drew back in horror; her face, if anything, went whiter. "Did I kill a man?"

He nodded grinning. "Most likely, my dear. Shot him right through the body. Found the hole in the armor plate and went for it. So far as I know . . ."

With a low moan she fainted. Had his arms not been around her, she would have fallen.

Consternation on his face, he lowered her to the ground. Kneeling beside her, he patted her hand awkwardly before unfastening the tight leather cap and pulling it from her head.

Her fair hair was plastered in darkly gold fishhooks about her head. Tossing the damp leather aside he pushed the hair back from her forehead and waved his hand back and forth in front of her face to stir up a breeze. "Fool girl," he muttered. "Have no idea what to do with you. A girl. If you were a boy, I know what I would do." He grinned slightly. "Actually, I cannot imagine what I would do if you were a boy. No boy I ever knew fainted on me."

Untying the strings on her padded woolen jacket, he pulled it aside. It, too, was wet as was her clothing under it. The small mounds of her breasts were clearly outlined beneath his gaze. No question about her sex, he thought wryly.

At the rush of comparatively cool air to her head and body, she stirred weakly and moaned.

"Time for a drink," he said heartily, lifting her head and shoulders onto his knees and uncorking the leather

bottle of wine he had carefully stowed after the crossing at Bresle. He held it to her lips, his other hand supporting the back of her head as she drank.

After a weak swallow, she coughed and opened her eyes. "Did I really kill someone?"

Ranulf raised an eyebrow. "You held your ground against a knight charging full tilt and swinging a broadsword."

She moaned and closed her eyes. Her hand reached for the wine, closed over his fingers and guided the bottle to her mouth. "Oh, dear God!"

"Everyone was most impressed," Ranulf chuckled. "You sighted along your arrow, found the chink in the armor, and let fly. At twenty yards the shock knocked him backward. His sword went flying, the horse veered off to the right and you were left the field. Most impressive. I take my hat off to you." He grinned down at her.

She shuddered. More tears trickled down her cheeks from under her closed eyelids. "I never meant to kill anyone."

He stared at her. He had forgotten the pain and nausea he had felt when he had killed his first man. A youth at the time, not much older than this girl, he had been violently ill while tears spouted from his eyes. The old soldier with him at the time had laughed and scoffed. Later the man had said that he had done so to make Ranulf behave like a man. But the laughter and scorn had made Ranulf resentful. His own very genuine suffering had been treated as somehow shameful and of no consequence.

"It was him or you," Ranulf said soberly at last.

"Perhaps I did not kill him," Gillian glanced at him hopefully.

Ranulf shook his head. "Not much chance of that. If he is not already dead from loss of blood and shock, the surgeon will probably kill him getting it out."

"Oh, no . . ." Gillian rolled off Ranulf's lap and crawled on hands and knees away from him. Her body convulsed and trembled as she retched.

He sprang after her and supported her head, drawing a scarf from beneath his tunic to wipe her face. At last when she had given up all she had, he pulled her up and half carried, half dragged her over to the tree. Setting her down with her back to its trunk, he positioned himself on his knees in front of her.

Taking both her hands in one of his, he mopped her colorless perspiring face. "Now listen to me," he said sternly. "When you dress like a soldier, you do a soldier's job. Except you do it better than most. That Frenchman was out to kill English soldiers. He thought you were a soldier. If you had not found the hole in his armor, he would have sliced you in two."

She gave a moan of anguish and pressed her hand against her mouth.

"Stop that," Ranulf frowned disgustedly. "I do not like the odor." When she had managed to get control of herself, he continued, "That knight should have been jerked out of the saddle and put an end to before he ever started that sweep down the line. But none of those 'brave lads' had the presence of mind to do what they were trained for. And as a result they died."

Her eyes started to fill with tears again.

"And stop that too!" He held up his hand, his dark eyes

hard as obsidian.

She gulped and swallowed.

"I yelled at you to use that damned bow . . . and you did." At her negative shake, he nodded. "Oh, yes, I did. And you heard me and did exactly what you had practiced hundreds of times. The way he went backward, the chances are he never knew what hit him."

"Oh, no!"

"Stop it! No more of that!" He handed her the wine jug and watched her while she drank. The color began to return slightly to her cheeks. Suddenly, he grinned wickedly. "By the way, Gillian, my dear, while you were unconscious, I checked to see if those protuberances really were pasted on."

She choked. Her cheeks flamed. "Damn you, Ranulf! Oh, damn you. How dare you? You . . ."

He sat back on his heels laughing like a very devil. "I just had to find out, my dear. After that performance with the bow in the face of such terrible danger, I just could not believe that you were not really a boy. I mean women. Bah! Screaming, crying, shrinking creatures. I would not believe that one was capable of even drawing a bow, much less using it effectively. So I checked."

Her hands flew to her breasts now concealed by the tunic which had flapped down across her when she stood. Her eyes flashed fire. Bright color stained her cheeks. Her mouth opened, then closed as she could think of no words strong enough to convey her disgust and hatred of him.

Laughing, he rose and struck a pose. "Your color is good now, my dear. I really suggest you pull your . . . er . . . self together. We have many miles to ride before nightfall. I believe the carnage has been cleared away."

Suddenly, she turned pale again. "I did not hurt anyone else, did I?"

"No, my dear."

"The knight who charged toward me with his lance. I did not shoot him, did I?"

Ranulf shook his head. "No. Evidently, that fellow thought better of charging into your arrows, my dear. He reined his horse off to the right and rode to aid his comrade whom you dispatched so efficiently. Good thinking on his part, say I."

Gillian pushed herself to her feet. "He was Brian," she hid her face in her hands. The emotion coursing through her was too intense. She would show it in her face, and Ranulf would mock her for it.

"Who was?"

"The knight who turned away. I recognized him. The blue and gold scarf. The medallion on the breastplate." Drawing a deep breath, she dropped her hands.

"You cannot be sure," Ranulf told her, his face no longer mocking.

"I am sure."

He whistled softly. "I would laugh about this. I really would, but somehow I think you would kill me if I did."

Without speaking she began to lace the strings of her tunic. The full horror of what she had almost done made her weak in the knees again. "Is there any more of that wine left?" she asked when she was decently covered again.

Ranulf had been watching her closely. Helping himself to a hearty mouthful first, he passed it to her. "Finish it."

She threw back her head and poured the raw red liquid down her throat without flinching. With scarcely a

shudder, she swallowed.

"'Tis not easy," Ranulf mused as if he were speaking to himself, "to have someone you love on the other side in a battle."

She nodded. "I might have killed him today."

Ranulf patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Come," he said. "They are reforming the lines."

## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

Brian swung wearily from the saddle. Stripping the leather cord that held the tippet to the basinet, he shoved the face covering aside and pulled the basinet from his head. With the heavy metal pieces dangling from one hand, he pushed the mail hauberk back around his neck. Enjoying the rush of blessed coolness, he drew in a deep breath.

With a touch of unc customary mockery, he lifted the basinet and stared at it. Had he really worked and trained all his young life for the privilege of boiling alive inside that?

The pointed tippet with its down-slanted eye slits and regular lines of perforations over the cheeks and mouth faintly resembled some predatory bird. It regarded him silently. He shook his head. He really was deranged.

He had delivered the knight of the scarlet mantle to the

surgeons. No words had been exchanged between them, but the raspy shallow breathing inside the visor along with the sluice of blood that dyed the knight's mail skirt, the saddle, and the horsecloth had told their own story.

Brian accepted a cup of cool wine from a man appointed to esquire him. Docilely, he stood while the fellow unbuckled the various straps and undid the leather lacings. Like a cicada shedding its shell, his body emerged from the heavy metal. Then the chain-mail hauberk was slipped off his arms. At last the body servant slipped off the fustian shirt that protected his body from the sores caused as a natural consequence of metal rubbing against skin.

Shivering slightly as the breeze cooled his skin, he stood in his breechclout to have his body rubbed dry with a linen towel.

"That was a bad wound," the man remarked conversationally as he patted gently at the skin over the reddish-pink gash at Brian's waist.

"Yes," Brian agreed draining the wine and holding out the cup to be refilled.

The servant obliged, then held a soft robe for Brian to slip over his head. "Looked well treated though. The stitching held fine."

"Hurt like sin," Brian remarked drily. "It should have held fine." To close the conversation, Brian turned away, staring across the grassy areas toward Marshal Boucicault's pavilion. The old wound in his side ached with a dull throbbing pain. It weakened his concentration allowing his thoughts to turn ever and again to the home that was no more and the love that he had renounced.

Gillian! The body servant glanced at him questioningly. Flushing, Brian coughed as if he had caught something in



his throat. He must have muttered her name. The pain increased. He feared it would be with him always, and he had little defense against it.

Even the English archer today. Fierce fellow that one. Standing in his stirrups, bow drawn back, arrow nocked, waiting for him. Waiting until Brian came so close that the arrow would pierce the armor plate. Cool, deadly, the eyes dark wells, the face expressionless . . . The face . . . Gillian's face . . .

Suddenly, he knew. Somehow Hob and Gillian had joined up with the English army. Of course, they would take an archer of her caliber. He remembered the night she had saved him from Ranulf by loosing an arrow through the slit in the door. Like lightning she was with a bow and more than accurate.

The thought made him momentarily weak. Only his own concern for his wounded fellow had made him swerve his horse away to intercept instead of riding the archer down and skewering him on the tip of the lance. He smiled ruefully. Or being shot himself. The chances were good that she could have spotted a chink somewhere in his own armor. Then he would be the one whose life drained away while the surgeons worked vainly to remove the steel broadhead buried somewhere within his body.

Had she known him? He doubted it. His own armor concealed him completely. Many knights wore blue and gold scarves. He had not come close enough for her to recognize the medallion on his breastplate.

Wearily, he passed a hand across his eyes. Fate had played with him most cruelly in the last few months. His comfortable world of honor and chivalry, firmly anchored to the security of family ties, had been crushed beneath a

series of gigantic blows. Likewise the type of woman he had always expected to love and cherish as the idealized wife of his dreams and mother of his children had metamorphosed into the slender waiflike figure whom he loved without restraint even while she drove him wild with her shocking ideas.

And now fate had played its cruelest trick. The woman whose life should have been joined to his stood on the opposite side of the world facing him over the very arrows he had helped her to make. Exhausted and despairing, he squeezed the bridge of his nose tightly between his thumb and third finger. He could not face the Marshal of France with tears on his cheeks.

The skirmish which Brian had volunteered to lead against the English had confirmed their diminished numbers. They had crossed the Bresle and were now making for the Blanche-Taque ford on the Somme. In his own mind, Brian was sure the marshal intended to prevent the Somme crossing, drive the English back into France, and hold them trapped until reinforcements could arrive to crush them and their upstart king once and for all.

The guard before the marshal's tent stood aside for Brian to enter.

"De Trenanay." Jean Boucicault's shrewd dark eyes took in the deep lines grooved in the hollowed cheeks and the pinched look about the mouth. "Sit down, man." He indicated a camp chair beside a field table overlaid with maps. "More wine." He pointed to Brian's half-empty flagon, and it was instantly refilled. "Drink up. Drink up."

Brian shook his head, preferring to make his report first. "The English are as we suspected, sir. About five to

six thousand men-at-arms, mounted archers, and archers on foot. We tested them a few miles south of Bailleul. The line broke but rallied quickly. De Montville was injured."

Boucicault sighed. "Good man. I shall send word that he is to have special attention."

"Thank you, sir."

"Undoubtedly, they will try to cross at Blanche-Taque, but they must be prevented from doing this. If we can hold them at the Somme until Alençon and D'Albret arrive, we can drive them back and forth across Picardy until they are exhausted and surrender." The marshal bent over his maps staring closely at them with his brilliant black eyes.

"Without ever having to engage them in a serious battle," Brian added hopefully. His concern for Gillian had changed his outlook on the war.

The marshal raised his head in surprise. Never in his experience had he heard a knight approve of a tactic that did not lead to instant battle. Trenanay must be more exhausted than he looked. Perhaps he was not well. When he had joined the force, he had looked impassive although a bit strained. But a careful study of the younger man's face revealed nothing.

Shrugging, Boucicault returned to his maps. "Exactly. Fabian tactics. Run from the enemy. Make him chase you. Then when he catches you, make him run. Never engage anyone. Particularly when their force is as strong as yours or stronger." As he spoke, he continued to pore over the maps.

Brian sipped his wine. The marshal's stock was much better than the *vin ordinaire* supplied for the common soldiers. Since he had joined the army without retinue,

he had eaten the rations supplied to the lowliest soldiers and servants.

Boucicault ordered a squadron sent out to drive strong, sharp stakes in the slow-moving swampy passage. "For the ford is wide. It is a bad place to fight, but not impossible as the rest of the river is. We do not want them to come at it in a rush and push us back. A strong, determined detachment of mounted archers could make the difference. They must not get across."

His face concealed in his cup, Brian nodded. Surely, fate had tormented him long enough. If Boucicault had only known, he would have been surprised to find himself cast in the role of good angel.

Ranulf swore crudely and viciously. One side of his jaw was swollen and his personal supply of stolen wine had run out. "Gil!"

The girl came to kneel at his side, a cup of steaming liquid in her hands. "Drink this, Ranulf. Hold it in your mouth a bit before each swallow. The heat will ease the pain."

"What is it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Beef broth."

Again the man cursed. "Beef broth. Cursed beef. All we've had to eat for three days is dried beef and walnuts. Walnuts! No wonder I broke a tooth."

She nodded soothingly. "Both are hard to stomach as a steady diet. Drink up. I had Alys make it for you. She is good at cooking. Practically the only one in the train who is."

"All the cooks who did not die of dysentery stayed in Harfleur. No fools they." Ranulf leaned sulkily back

against his saddle. Tentatively he sipped at the cup, then made a face. "Bah! Tastes like she boiled shoe leather."

Gil returned to her seat across the fire from him. She agreed with him wholeheartedly about the taste, but it made a change from the constant gnawing required to turn a strip of dried beef into something edible. Besides Ranulf loved to complain.

"Not a damn thing in this wretched countryside. The moors are scenes of mass confusion by comparison."

"Also the last man who was caught stealing something from the countryside got hanged," Gil reminded him.

"He stole from a church. A pyx. *Jesu Maria*." He crossed himself piously. "I would never . . ." He was off again. Gillian closed her eyes and allowed her mind to drift.

For five days the English had marched down the Somme ever deeper into France, ever farther from Calais. Their food was almost exhausted. Ever on the far bank were the French.

Gillian thought of Brian. Did he think of her? Had he recognized her? Was that the reason he had swerved aside? The memory of the day had dimmed somewhat. Her own perceptions had changed. Perhaps the charging knight had not been Brian after all. As Ranulf kept insisting, blue and gold were very common colors for a knight.

She hugged her arms about her body and rolled tightly into her blankets. The nights were getting colder. October was finally turning autumnal.

Ranulf was shaking her shoulder. The night was pitch-dark, but all around her could be heard the stirrings of the camp. "We march tonight," he informed her without preface. "Roll out and roll up. Mount your horse and

stick close to me."

Teeth chattering, she followed him. The line was eerily silent as the semiexhausted, dispirited men stumbled along. Within a mile Gil heard the change in the hoof-beats. Hollowly, they echoed as the animals and men moved out onto what seemed to be a bridge or causeway.

"The Somme," Ranulf growled excitedly. "We must be moving over it. Thank God! We might see England again after all."

Gillian caught his excitement and for a few minutes her blood stirred at the thought of home. Almost a lifetime had passed since she had sat in her shop in York. She had left a green girl; she would return a mature woman with a woman's problems to be faced in the future.

"The bridge is knocked out."

The word went up and down the line. Anguished whispers conveyed the message. "Damn!" Ranulf snarled. All around them were their own muffled sounds rising above the faint soughing of the wind over the water of the Ingon marsh.

Then in a clatter of shod hooves, Nicholas Warrenby rode out of the graying dawn. "I need two hundred archers to wade across on foot," he informed Ranulf. "I thought immediately of you and yon Gil Fletcher. I heard what you did, lad, knocking out that knight. We need cool heads like yours."

"We are mounted archers," Ranulf tried to protest. "We . . ."

"Follow me." Warrenby reined his horse around on the narrow causeway and trotted away toward the east where the pale pink streaks of dawn began to creep up the sky.

"I am deathly afraid of water and I cannot swim," Gillian protested to Ranulf.

"With you that makes two of us," he swore fervently. "Damn! Why did you stand up to that knight? You could have panicked and dived for cover like everyone else. I did."

"You told me to shoot him," she reminded him. "The fault is with you, 'milord.'"

His dark gaze was vitriolic. "Now you call me 'milord.' You never do anything that I tell you at the right time. I know for certain that you are a woman."

They dismounted and joined Warrenby's detachment. In the pearly light of morning, they hopped and scrambled from rock to rock of the broken causeway. They had shed their heavy jackets and leather and wicker caps. Some men had shed their shirts as well.

"Stay in front of me," Gillian hissed spitefully in Ranulf's ear. "If I get this old smock too wet, you lose your hold over me."

"If I could be sure you would drown, I would push you into the water," he snarled.

At last they reached the Somme itself. "It looks cold," he complained.

"Bows and arrows overhead," came back the command.

"Oh, Lord," Gillian breathed, her teeth chattering as much from fear as from cold. The water rose above her knees. At any minute she expected to step in a hole and go under, but the water rose no farther than her waist in midstream.

At last on relatively dry ground, Warrenby sent them into the woods in all directions to attack and hold off any French.

"What do we do now?" Gillian asked from her position of concealment by a broken stone wall that overlooked the Athies road.

Ranulf lounged with eyes closed, his face and sparse brown beard turned upward to the afternoon sun. "We rest tonight." He wriggled his body into a more comfortable position.

"And then what?"

"Tomorrow? I expect tomorrow we run like hell for Calais."

"They have crossed, sire."

"Damn!" Boucicault's face registered his extreme disappointment. "Where?"

"At Voyennes."

The marshal's expression became murderous. "I gave orders that the causeway across the Ingon be destroyed."

"The fools only broke up about half a mile of it and left the debris in the marsh. A detachment of archers got across and held the bridgehead while the engineers repaired it."

Boucicault struck his fist into the palm of his hand. His oath was so foul that the messenger blanched. "Assemble my council. We must plan new strategies."

That evening in Peronne only six miles from Athies, the marshal called his council. Although the flower of France sat at his table, he knew the real battle would be fought around it. Beside him sat Constable D'Albret, an experienced soldier. He could be counted on to realize the importance of strategy. The others . . . Boucicault braced himself.

Besides the duke of Alençon, the marshal faced the



dukes of Bourbon and Orléans, who had already issued a challenge to Henry V to name the place to do battle.

"We expect him to reply forthwith," the duke of Orléans was saying *sotto voce* to the counts of Eu and Richemont.

"He could do no less," Richemont agreed. "But do you trust him to choose a battlefield where fair opportunities may be seized on all sides to achieve honors?"

"Gentlemen." Boucicault interrupted them. His face remained impassive as he stared at Orléans's fair young face. Before the strained eagerness to do battle, the marshal felt infinitely old. "I gather from your conversation that you too have heard the tragic news. The English king has managed to get his army across the ford at Voyennes."

"Bravo!" the count of Eu declared. "He is now in a more sporting position to fight. I mislike having to attack a man as he is coming out of the water. He is under a terrific disadvantage."

"Of course, best is not having to attack him at all," D'Albret inserted softly. At his comment the nobles turned as one to stare at him as if he were some strange creature.

Bourbon broke the silence. "The duke of Berry will have disgraced himself forever in the sight of the king. When we win this great victory here, he will fly into such a rage at being foolishly persuaded to stay away."

"We will take pains to capture the English king and bring him with a halter around his neck to Charles," Orléans promised with a chuckle. "I should first like to lead him back through all the towns he has threatened, so that all the cowardly officials who presented themselves to him may spit upon him."

Above the general laughter Boucicault called for order. "Milords, I propose that we delay our attack and allow our enemy to further exhaust himself."

"Not to attack immediately?"

"What is this? Not attack?"

"Never. We have issued the challenge."

"The honor of France demands—"

"We are not fighting a duel, gentlemen. Nor yet a tournament. We are fighting..." The marshal's voice thundered above them, but he was shouted down in his turn.

"He is a knight first and a king second. He will adhere to the principles of chivalry." This from Orléans, who had half-risen from his seat and leaned across the table with clenched fist.

"How can you be sure of that?" The marshal's cold voice and dark eyes drove the young man back to his seat.

"He has behaved in honorable fashion all across the north of France," Bourbon replied haughtily. "We have had no reports of looting, burning of crops, nor killing of the people."

"He would be a fool to do such as that," Constable D'Albret argued. "The people in the first town he approached surrendered, and he treated them well. Thereafter everyone surrendered. He has not left a trail of enemies behind his back."

"They have even given him gifts of bread and wine," Boucicault pointed out. "No, Henry Lancaster is not a foolish man. But acts of good sense do not prove he will adhere to the rules of chivalry. In fact... quite the opposite."

His final remark brought a fierce growl from those around him. Alençon pushed his chair back and stood. "I

think you forget yourself, Jean Boucicault," he threatened. "You are here at our request to handle the details of outfitting and training the commons. Because each of us is leader of his own army, we allow you to act as a sort of mediator among us. Remember your place."

The marshal drew a deep angry breath. "You do not understand your adversary. Have you forgotten what happened to your great-grandfathers at Crécy? The duke of Berry remembers Poitiers. His own brother was captured there. The English have a habit of winning. This Henry will not want to break that habit. The great-grandson of Edward III will win at all costs, or die trying."

"Then he will die!" Alençon thundered.

"We have issued the challenge," Orléans repeated. His mouth twitched; he could not control his delight. He broke into a high hysterical laugh. "Honor will be satisfied."

Bourbon rose, signaling the end of the council. "Then it is decided. We shall wait until he sets the time and place, then crush him with one blow. No Englishman shall ever forget the lesson we will teach."

## *Chapter Thirty-Five*

Howard of Rothingham stared up into the darkness of the tent. He should have been asleep. His most basic needs had been more than satisfied by the loving ministrations of Alys. As if by magic, she had produced a light stew made from the dried beef they ate habitually but artfully flavored with wild onions and wine. He suspected that she had saved some of her ration of bread to thicken it. But however she had done it, he had dined better than the king that night.

Afterward, she had caressed him until he was wild with desire, holding him off, increasing his pleasure until he writhed and groaned. Finally, she had opened her sweet thighs to him and guided him into her. Despite his firm resolves he had lost all control, shuddering and plunging deep into her until he had exploded in a burst of fiery delight. His ecstatic cry he had muffled against her

shoulder. He knew his teeth had bruised her, for he had felt her wince under him.

Now pressed against his side, her regular breathing warmed his neck while the motion of her firm breasts caressed his chest. He tightened his arms around her, rubbing his fingertips gently across the satiny skin of the inside of her arm.

All his life he had chased the dream of romantic love. His exploits with the cavalry in this very country twenty years ago had been chiefly so he might have such deeds to boast of when courting a lady. His education, his arts had all been achieved so that a lady would be pleased and impressed when he wrote poetry to her and then sang his love songs.

Love as the jongleurs and bards had sung of it was a bubble rather like the bubble of chivalry. It had never really been there and yet it always had. He had longed to be a knight, sacrificed for it, suffered for it. When it escaped him, he had even been tempted to steal for it, thereby ironically destroying the honor he must leave unstained to achieve the chivalric ideal.

Yet all around him lesser men achieved and then were forsworn a dozen times. Most of the men in whose midst he had been, including the king, played the game of chivalry, but in the serious business of fighting a war, they recognized that games must be left behind.

Romantic love was a game also. He hugged Alys closer until she moaned faintly in protest. But when the real business of love came into one's life, romance and all its posturings fled out the window.

"Alys," he whispered. "Alys."

She stirred, grasped convulsively at his neck. Her fingers slid down and twined around the thick mat of hair

on his chest. He felt her lips move against his skin.

"Alys."

"Hob?" Her voice was just a whisper in the darkness.

"Alys, I love you."

She did not answer. He might have thought she had fallen asleep without understanding his words except that she was very still. He waited patiently until she exhaled with almost painful slowness.

"Will you marry me? I want you badly for my wife," he hurried on. "When we return to England, instead of going to your nephew you could go with me. Brian gave me some money to take care of you and to see me on my way. I could give up the tourney circuit. I know all about armor. How to make it, how to mend it. I could set up a shop. I know dozens of knights on the circuit who would come to me for repairs and replacements. People who know armor best are the ones who have actually worked in it."

Moved by the excitement in his voice, she sat up. "You are serious."

"I have been thinking about it all night."

"But you love chivalry. Your dream—"

"—is a dream." He took her hands which she had pressed against his chest. Lifting them he kissed each palm in turn. "Alys, I am forty-two years old. Chivalry will die right here in France if King Henry has to fight. He will win hands down. Gillian proved that."

"Gillian?"

"She stopped a knight's charge and killed him. A girl. He never came close to her."

"But surely? . . ."

"The king took Harfleur. You did not hear what Nicholas Warrenby said. The engineers blasted away

with the big cannons and knocked the wall down. The day of the walled city is over. An ordinary man can just pull up a cannon and blow the wall down. And the knight's armor is just like the wall of the city. Listen, I saw a handgun once. Someone will get round to perfecting those things so each man may carry his own cannon. Then the knight's armor is gone."

"Are you saying that you do not want to be a knight?"

"No, I suppose I shall always wish to be a knight. Dreams die hard and with their deaths comes a sense of failure. But I can survive. I can become something else. For years people will continue to want armor for all sorts of things. The tourney circuit will last so long as men are willing to get their bodies smashed and people are willing to give prizes to see them do it."

Alys smiled in the dark. "I suppose there will always be ladies so long as men are willing to pay to have them grace their houses."

He laughed softly, pulling her down onto his chest. "You will not be a lady, Alys," he promised her. "You will be a woman and my wife."

She began again to caress him, but he rolled her over onto her back. "No!" he growled fiercely. "No more of that tonight. You are the one who should be pleased and caressed. By God, Alys, you are like a drug. I could lie on my back like a Muslim and have you, the pearl of my harem, do all the work for the rest of my life."

He gathered her wrists together in one hand and pushed them above her head. "Now leave them there," he told her fiercely. "Pretend you are chained and I am your master."

She shivered deliciously at the thought. And then she could think no more as with hands and mouth he began a

slow assault on her senses. His lips covered every inch of her skin, kissing, nibbling, delivering little nipping bites, and then apologizing with wildly extravagant phrases. Her beauty had driven him mad. She was so delicious that he could not forbear to taste her delicate flavor.

When she forgot herself and pressed his head against her belly, he chastened her sternly, reminding her where her hands belonged. Hastily she replaced them above her head, panting with delight as he gripped her buttocks and lifted her to meet his questing mouth.

Finally, when she could not suppress her cries of pleasure, he pulled himself up and entered her, covering her mouth with his own. Thus impaling her with his tongue as well as his manhood, he held her strongly while she writhed and twisted in her ecstasy.

As she achieved her peak of pleasure, he lunged hard, driving himself over the edge, so they fell spiraling down together.

"I love you," she admitted. "I never thought I would love anyone. Not after . . . But you have taught me gentleness and kindness. I do not care to be a lady if I can be a woman for you."

He lay beside her then, his hand clasping hers. "And I do not care to be a knight, if I can be a man for you."

She too stared at the roof of the tent, now grayed by the first streaks of dawn. "I pray there will be no battle," she said wearily, thinking as she did that they had loved the night away and would have to suffer through tomorrow without sleep. "Yet I feel it in my bones. The very air is charged with anger. Perhaps this time you will win your golden spurs."

He laughed as he sat up. He should be waking up the knights to whom he had been assigned. "How strange to



win the spurs when I no longer care!"

Word of the ducal challenge spread through the ranks like wildfire. The three heralds rode through the lines of soldiers resting from their exhausting crossing of the Somme. Their flamboyant costumes drew loud catcalls from the muddy, ragged men dressed mostly in black except for the red crosses of St. George many wore on their tunics. They came bearing the lilies of France on their standards as well as the banners of Orléans and Bourbon.

"Lovely, lads," Ranulf remarked mockingly to Gillian. "That slight blond fellow in the middle. So sweet, so virginal."

She pretended to study the herald closely. "I agree about the slight. But he has little pig eyes and a smallish mouth. My guess is that he pouts when he cannot get his own way."

He raised his eyebrows. "You are not nearly so much fun to tease as you once were. I have been looking around in the ranks for a suitable replacement, but everyone looks too big and savage."

"Poor Ranulf! You may have to join the rest of the world in its sexual preferences."

He looked at her slender figure speculatively. "Are you perhaps volunteering your services to make a good Christian man out of me, Gillian?"

"Of course not." Horrified, she jumped away tugging her jacket tightly across her chest.

He laughed loudly at her, making a sideswipe which she ducked and then cheering when she darted away among the other archers. He had found a new aspect to

tease. His eyes returned to the heralds being led by the duke of York to the king's pavilion. His face grew hard at the thought that he might not have much longer to tease anybody; or, alternatively, no one to tease.

No one remained at ease. The heralds were dismissed after only a brief time. Heads up and standards waving, they rode out of the camp each a hundred gold crowns richer for his bravery.

Gillian joined Hob, whose position as esquire put him closer to the king. "What did the Frenchmen want?" she asked excitedly.

"To know when the king will fight."

"Did he tell them? That seems stupid. If you are going to kill someone, you ought to go do it, not let him get prepared." Gil looked disgustedly at the royal pavilion with its standard-bearer standing stiffly in front.

"We shall soon know," Hob pushed her slightly in front of him so she might get a better look. "Here he comes."

Henry of Monmouth was a handsome man, Gillian thought as she stared in awe. Although not above medium height, he carried himself like a god. His brown hair cut short in soldier's fashion was like a cap on his well-shaped head. Wearing the coat of arms of England, he mounted his small gray horse.

"He always rides that horse when he has something important to do," Hob whispered.

With a pat to the animal's neck, the king of England touched spurs to his mount's dappled flanks and rode into the midst of his men. Behind him his uncles York and Camoys mounted their horses also to fall in behind.

As the knots of men began to straighten out into lines, he stopped ever and again to speak to them. The men's

faces as they listened were grave. Many glanced over their shoulders in the direction the heralds had taken toward the walled city of Peronne.

As he came abreast of Gillian with Hob standing behind her, his hand on her shoulder, he reined the gray horse around to face them.

"Who is the archer among the squires?"

Gillian gulped, looking from side to side for a means to melt back into the crowd. Hob patted her shoulder. "This is Gil Fletcher of York, Your Majesty. He is a fletcher and bowman master."

The king stared hard at her slight figure. His clear hazel eyes reminded her of Brian's. Timidly, she smiled. Her hand found the sheaf of arrows hung from her shoulder and she ran her fingers across the feathers nervously.

Henry smiled back, his lips parting to expose very even white teeth. "I seem to know the name."

York leaned forward. "That is the archer who wounded the French knight before the ford at Blanche-Taque."

Henry raised his eyebrows, then looked her up and down again. Suddenly, he laughed. A rather sober laugh to be sure, but a laugh. "Brave work, lad," he congratulated her.

"Thank you, sir."

"And excellent shooting, so I was told." He glanced at Hob. "You spoke truth when you called this one 'bowman master.'" He raised his voice to include the rest of the men standing close at hand. "They tell me to name the time and place, lads. They say they will never let us reach Calais but will take revenge."

He paused for effect, his eyes seeking out the faces of

all within his hearing. "We told them, 'Straight we march for Calais, and if our enemies try to disturb us in our journey, it will not be without the utmost peril. We do not intend to seek them out, but neither shall we in fear of them move either more slowly or more quickly than we wish to do. We advised them again not to interrupt our journey, nor to seek what would be its consequence: a great shedding of Christian blood.' What say you to this, lads?"

"More of theirs than ours," one man shouted.

"Why you say right," the king replied, smiling his sober smile. "And what says Gil Fletcher?"

Gillian paled. The king of England wanted her to say something. Instinctively, she knew he wanted her to say something he could use. "God brought you this far, Your Majesty. He must love you very much."

Around her she could hear the men muttering agreement. The duke of York smiled a winsome smile. Henry Lancaster smiled too. "And you, too, Gil Fletcher. He will bring us all safety through." Clicking his tongue and slapping the reins against the gray neck, he urged the little horse down the lines of waiting men.

For three days in the cold driving rain of October they marched, with the signs of French soldiers ever about them. On the next day after the heralds had delivered the challenge, the Bapaume-Peronne road was a sea of mud. As her horse bogged down, even beneath her slight weight, Gillian stared at the mess bewildered. "I do not understand," she complained to Ranulf who had dismounted minutes before her and was leading his mount beside hers. "Why is this part of the road so

muddy? The rest has not been so bad."

He did not answer immediately. At that precise moment, only his hold on the reins prevented him from sprawling full length in the muck. When he was able with much cursing and panting to regain his footing, he began to curse her too. "Stupid, stupid," he snarled. "Too stupid to be believed. The whole of the damned French army passed across this road sometime today, and you cannot even figure out what made it this swamp. Have you not eyes?"

Shivering and exhausted, she regarded him through the driving rain. To answer him would be useless. She had nothing to apologize for. Indeed she was too weary to take offense. She slid off her mount and sloshed to its head. The clinging mud clogged her boots to her knees. Seizing the bridle, she pulled manfully to get the horse started. He must not sink to his knees now. If she had to leave him behind, she had just as well stop herself.

Ranulf caught her mount's bridle from the other side. "Up, you—" The name he called the animal made Gillian blush. It was bad even for Ranulf. As if offended, the horse gave a snort, bowed its neck, and struggled forward heaving its hindquarters out of the mud.

"Thanks," Gillian muttered.

"My pleasure," he sneered. "Cursing stupid animals is my pleasure." He slogged back to his horse and led it forward again.

"Then this must be your lucky day, 'milord,'" she murmured.

"Why do they not attack?" Alys asked Hob for the

fifteenth time. "They are all around us. From what you say there are thousands . . . tens of thousands. We are so badly outnumbered that they could almost ride us down without swinging a sword."

Hob coughed deeply. The torrential rain and chill had settled a cold in his chest. "Knights hate to fight in the rain," he explained when he could catch his breath. "Their horses are too heavy to move swiftly under the best of circumstances. The weight of mud on their hooves and trappings exhausts them. Worse, if a knight falls off his horse in the mud, he is like to drown before anyone can get to him. Especially if he falls face down."

Alys shivered as she handed him a cup of hot broth. "I cannot imagine why anyone in his right mind would want to be a knight."

"When I start enumerating all the difficulties to you"—Hob grinned—"I cannot either."

"Do you think," Alys asked hopefully, "that if the rain continues for the next several days, we might reach Calais without them attacking us?"

Hob patted her hand. Smiling slightly, he shook his head. "The grand dukes of France are out there in the darkness. They are very close to us. Probably no more than a couple of miles away. They have issued challenges. They outnumber us at least five to one . . . maybe more. They will attack before too much longer. If we escape, their honor would be stained."

She hugged him hard against her, weeping tears into his tunic.

"Stop that," he chided her. "'Tis already wet enough without your adding to it. I hate a crying woman anyway." With those words he kissed her soundly on the

mouth. And she pushed him down on his back to work her special magic with him.

On the eve of St. Crispin's Day, the word flew round the ranks. The French army blocked the way they must march tomorrow. Nicholas Warrenby brought the word to Ranulf and Gillian as they sat huddled side by side for warmth beneath a small tree. The *ville* of Maisonnelles had not had nearly enough huts to accommodate the army. His grizzled beard dripped with water as the rain spattered into his face. His eyes glowed hotly. "Well, we almost made it, lads," were his first words as he surveyed the miserable pair.

"Made what?" Ranulf sneered.

"The port of Calais."

Ranulf raised his head sharply. His jaw tightened. "Is it to be tomorrow then?"

Warrenby nodded. The wind whistled harshly through the tree above them, and the water brushed off the leaves joined the downpour in pelting them even harder. "Your tree leaks," he observed.

"Stay and eat," Ranulf snarled sarcastically, flinging a walnut at the bowman master.

Warrenby chuckled. "Save that fight for the French," he advised. "And you, Gil?" He crouched down by her side. "How be ye?"

"I feel all right," she whispered doubtfully.

"Good lad!" He patted her shoulder. "Put him at your side tomorrow, and watch out for him," he commanded Ranulf.

"Aye. But he can watch out for himself. I put him by my side so he can watch out for me." Ranulf chuckled

edging himself closer to Gil. "He is by far the better shot."

Warrenby stood up. "The king has given the order. The camp is under a rule of silence. Everyone is to rest peacefully tonight. If someone breaks the rule, he will lose his right ear. See ye obey." With a terse good-night, he strode away to the rest of his rounds.

The water dripped from the tree. Gil shivered, her teeth chattering and clacking. I may not have to worry about tomorrow morning, she thought. I shall freeze to death tonight. At that moment a stronger gust of wind dropped a great shower of drops onto her head. Or drown, she added wearily.

"Gil," Ranulf's voice was so hoarse, it had lost all of its resonance.

"Yes."

"I am f-freezing."

"Me too."

He was silent for a moment. "Come over here with me," he said at last. "I promise not to do anything."

She hesitated. She had lived side by side with him for almost two weeks. She could hardly remember why she hated and feared him.

"Please."

The word was whispered so low, she could not be sure she had heard aright. "What did you say?"

The rain pelted on in the silence. At last, he spoke a bit louder. "Please, damn it."

Smiling, she rolled toward him, tugging her roll with her. He opened his arms to drag her in against him and combine the warmth of their bodies.



## *Chapter Thirty-Six*

Wide-eyed, white to the lips, Gillian stared at the might of the French forces. "What are they waiting for? Why are they just staring at us?" she muttered for the fourth time.

"They want us to get so scared we piss in our pants," Ranulf replied coarsely. His voice was only a shadow of its former self. When he cleared his throat, he grimaced as if his throat were sore. "Just as you are about to do. For God's sake, Gil. Get hold of yourself. You are going to make me so nervous that I shall lose faith in you."

As it had before, his coarse language had the effect of angering and steadying her. The French enemy was forgotten in her disgust and anger at the Englishman beside her. "God! Ranulf, but I despise you."

"I am delighted to hear you say that," he jeered. "After we slept together last night, I was afraid you might

develop tender feelings for me. After all, I am a handsome fellow as men count handsome features. I did not want you to suffer from disappointed love."

She laughed mirthlessly, "I am trying desperately to conceal my growing affection. I think you will agree that I am succeeding."

"You would do well to." He nodded. "For myself I appreciated the warmth, but the . . . ah . . . protuberances got in the way."

"Ranulf! . . ." What she might have told him was interrupted by the command to move.

"Advance banner! Advance banner!"

Her eyes locked with Ranulf's. The time had come. She tightened her lips to still their trembling. Ranulf, too, was white. He closed his eyes for a minute, then blinked and stared about him. On the right the woods of Tramecourt and on the left those of Agincourt were green walls closing around them.

"Advance banner!" From the center of the line of men-at-arms Henry rode forth. Out onto the pale green field of newly sown autumn wheat galloped the king of England, wearing both the lions of England and the lilies of France. His golden crown decorated with fleurons encircled his helmet. He had not yet donned the visor but wheeled his horse to face his men.

All along the line some five hundred yards wide, they watched him as his little gray palfrey pawed the earth. As one, five thousand men held their breath, their eyes trained steadfastly on the man they followed as they loved God. "Advance banner!" he called again. "In the name of Jesus, Mary, and Saint George!"

Like the wind, like the rumble of thunder, like the rattle of rain, their voices took up the call. Camoys and

York moved on the left and right each at the head of his group of men-at-arms. And between and on the outside, in four divisions, each formed in a wedge, each wedge shaped like the broadhead of an arrow, came the archers, their longbows strung, their double-pointed stakes hoisted over their shoulders. "Advance banner! Advance banner!"

Each man went down on his knees, making the sign of the cross in the earth with his hand and then placing his lips to the center of the cross.

"Jesus, Mary, and Saint George! Saint George!"

Gillian struggled with her stake as Nicholas Warrenby's troop stepped forward. The brief business of balancing all the pieces of wood gave her something to concentrate on. Suddenly, she was not afraid. Hefting the load awkwardly, she grinned a faint apology at Ranulf, who had hoisted his easily and was waiting, his lip curled faintly in impatience.

Surprisingly, he grinned back, a sardonic grin to be sure, but a grin nevertheless. Beneath their feet the new wheat was crushed into the muddy earth.

Two hundred yards, then four, then six. The outermost wedges of archers stood with their flanks in the trees on either side of the field.

The French lines were barely three hundred yards away. "Do we have to get so close?" Ranulf muttered.

Gillian's eye measured the distance. She was sweating profusely both from excitement and from the labor of carrying her load so far. "We are just about close enough. A good bow range."

He wiped his forearm across his mouth. "Any closer and we could stab them with the arrows."

The command came to implant the stakes. With ease

Ranulf drove his into the soft earth. "Glad to see the end of that damned thing," he commented dusting his hands. "Here, let me." He took Gillian's from her and drove it into the ground with a mighty overhead swing.

Together they arranged themselves shoulder to shoulder with the rest of Warrenby's troops to stare over their frail palisade at the massed lines.

"Better armed, better dressed, and many, many more of them," was Warrenby's succinct evaluation. "Now, lads. Make every arrow a good one."

Gillian pulled a dozen arrows from her quiver at her belt. Not broadheads these, but slender barrels with steel tips no wider than the shaft itself. If there was a chink to be found in the armor, these would find it. Dropping all but one on the ground beside her foot, she nocked it into position on the string. Smoothly her arms flexed, the left pushing outward at the same time the right pulled back. The gray cock feather brushed her cheek. Simultaneously, she took aim. Her eyes picked out a tall fellow fiddling with his windlass. Dumb crossbowman was her thought as she leaned back slightly to allow for arc and released.

A sound like the rushing of water over a weir vibrated in her ears. The air was dark with whirring, whishing death.

She did not wait to see whether her arrow had found the mark or missed. To do so would be to arouse herself to pity. These are targets, she said. Targets only. They are like painted circles far down the green on Sunday in York. York. Her mind went carefully blank. Like an automaton she bent, caught up another arrow, nocked it, drew back, and let fly.

All around her, people were doing the same. And from

three hundred yards away came the screams.

"Here they come!" Ranulf tugged at her sleeve, pointing wildly to right and left as from each flank of the French position charged some six hundred knights, in full panoply. Armored from helm to heel they lumbered forward. Their horses likewise armored wore full horse cloths over the heavy saddles.

Galloping, galloping through the cloggy mud, they swept out from the flanks and crowded each other as they sought to form a line in front of the panicky crossbowmen. Twelve hundred men could not ride abreast in the narrow space between the woods. Already some were pulling their horses. Those that led the charge began immediately to channelize themselves, aiming their lances for the English knights, instinctively avoiding the death hail of the archers.

Nearer they came, their heads bowed, charging sightless like bulls. No one wanted an arrow through the eye slit. Or and argent, gules and azure, sable and vert and purple. A mass of moving color thundered toward the stakes, divided in every conceivable fashion: cross and saltire, fess and bar, pale and chevron, pile and bend. A menagerie of animals threatened them: lions and leopards, wolves and boars, dolphins and harts, eagles and martlets, as well as mythological griffins and dragons.

The ragged, muddy black-garbed archers took no notice. With rhythmical precision, they sent their arrows into the charging mass, bouncing them off helms and cuirasses, shoulder plates and breastplates, and occasionally finding chinks. Sometimes a muffled cry would follow the arrow as a knight would break ranks either falling to the ground or pulling his destrier in an effort to

get himself out of the charging line.

"Aim for the horses!" Ranulf screamed in her ear.

Without questioning him, Gillian lowered her aim to the shoulder of a green and black horse cloth. Less than fifty yards away now, the horse screamed in agony as the arrow tore into its shoulder. Rearing and caracoling, it unseated its rider, who was flung headlong into the path of the mount on the right. Both mount and rider stumbled and crashed over the steel obstruction thrown so suddenly in the way. The wounded horse galloped in panic back through the knights who had restrained their mounts and into the lines of crossbowmen.

All along the front the wounded fell in the paths of the ones charging behind them and were buried under the stumbling bodies of their comrades. The few mounts that reached the stakes were impaled, unseating their riders in their death throes.

As a knight struggled to climb to his feet in front of them, Ranulf dropped his bow. "Cover me," he yelled and leaped between the stakes, drawing his dagger. The Frenchman managed to get one knee under him. He had broken the lance intended to be used at close quarters in the charge. With the point he stabbed awkwardly at Ranulf, who laughed nastily; then side-stepped as easily as a dancer and slapped an arm around the mailed shoulders. The point of the dagger slid between the gorget and breastplates and into the jugular. The mailed figure gurgled horribly before toppling slowly backward into the mud.

A terrified horse galloped down the lines headed straight for Ranulf. Gillian sent an arrow into its side through the horsecloth. It neighed shrilly before plunging back the way it had come adding to the havoc.

"That knight is mine," Ranulf declared to the archers around him as he darted back between the stakes and picked up his bow.

No one bothered to reply, for the number of dead and wounded was piling up high in front of them. They would all have rich pickings from the gold and jewels to be found under the armor.

"Nice to remind us," one man called. "I almost forgot what we were really fighting for."

"I claim the big black fellow yonder," yelled another. "Got to be rich. Look at the brass fittings on the armor."

"You want to fight me for him," came an answering growl. "My arrow took out his horse. He was trampled before you ever shot him."

Strangely the horror of the exchanges did not affect Gillian. The melee of writhing groaning bodies on the field had no human factors. The screams and pleas for mercy echoed hollowly from inside the helmets. No flesh showed anywhere. The scarlet tides sluicing out from between plates or through slits might have been red paint, spilled from buckets. Even the horses were covered from poll to hooves with armor and trappings.

Three hundred yards back up the field, the French archers and dismounted men-at-arms tried manfully to move forward at the commands of Marshal Boucicault and Constable D'Albret.

"Montjoie! Saint-Denis!" came a few hoarse cries. But more often could be heard screams as the hail of arrows resumed its flight over the writhing mass of agony a couple of hundred yards before them. In order to see, the men were forced to raise their heads to avoid the panicky dashes of the riderless horses as well as the retreat of the rear echelon who had lost their leaders and were gallop-

ing back straight through the lines of archers instead of returning to the flanks.

"Here they come again!" The English braced for the renewed attack. Seasoned veterans knew the first line had been a mere probe, a test of strength. But Gillian turned to Ranulf, "Surely they will not charge again? They could not make any headway." She looked around her hastily. "Everyone is standing. I cannot see a single man wounded."

His lips curled slightly in a pitying smile. "Oh, they will charge again. Use your eyes. We might have killed a couple of hundred. They have thousands over there. Keep shooting and pray!"

"But they have to come at us over their own dead and wounded!" Gillian's eyes widened with horror as she beheld the knights forming again despite the bodies lying still or feebly struggling in the mud between.

"They have no choice. They cannot charge through the woods. Low hanging limbs are hell on horsemen." Ranulf nocked another arrow and let fly, striking a crossbowman as he frantically cranked his winder. The man went over sideways, clutching at his shoulder. "Got him."

Again the charge. Shouting fiercely, the French slogged through the churned-up morass toward the lines. As they neared, they tried to increase speed to produce the greatest shock of impact. In the lead Boucicault with D'Albret on his left and Alençon on his right bloodied his spurs in the destrier's flanks with little success. The mighty animal could not manage to gallop through a field of liquid mud almost knee-deep.

Alençon pulled his horse to the left closing in tight beside the marshal. "The king!" he yelled to the men



following his lead, crowding the middle of the line. "Capture the king!"

Boucicault mentally reeled at the words. The fool was pressing in too close. They would have no room to fight. He himself could not move to the left because of crowding D'Albret. And ever the arrows spattered and twanged.

The duke and the marshal struck the center of the line almost at the same time, their doubled contact sending the mounted English men-at-arms reeling backward. We are lost, Boucicault thought when he realized that he could not raise his arms to strike the enemy.

As Alençon's force surged forward, the mount directly behind the leader slipped sideways and went down. Immediately the charge turned to chaos as knights and animals fell. Helpless to rise in the clinging mud, overrun by their own men coming on behind, they lay in their monstrous cocoons of steel and waited for death.

"Stay close, little girl!" Ranulf shouted in her ear. "Leave the bow and follow me." A merciless killer, he was in his element. His eyes flashed black fire as he drew the short sword and plunged from behind the walls of stakes.

"I cannot!" she cried. And yet she did. They were not like men. Again she closed her mind to the screams and pleas. She did not hear them. Anything that stirred, she stabbed. Steel rang against steel. Her arm vibrated, and pain shot from palm to shoulder.

"I cannot," she whispered, as her blade slid in under the armpit of a knight struggling to rise. A scarlet stream poured out as she twisted the blade to withdraw it. Its hilt slipped out of her sweaty palm.

"Gillian! Behind you!"

She whirled to see a steel monster looming over her. But luck had claimed her for its own. An unhorsed knight who had managed to clamber to his feet slashed downward with his great sword. Had she not turned, the blade would have cut her in two. She screamed shrilly as she tried to leap away. A terrible blow struck the side of her thigh.

Her mind whirled. One thought remained uppermost as she saw the blood on his blade, saw it drawn back to slash across her body. If I fall, I will drown in the mud. As if she had not been injured, she leaped back.

The leg was numb; she dragged it after her. He was pursuing her, slashing at the air again. He too must be wounded, she thought vaguely. He may be bleeding too. Still she stayed ahead of him hopping frantically.

Ranulf flung himself at the back of the knight. The fellow was taller than he. Damn his lack of height! His hands closed over the eye slits in the visor. "Gillian! Kill him!"

The sword slashed crazily in the air. Ducking under it, she flung her weight hard against the knight's chest. Her teeth clicked together with shock as she rammed her shoulder against the steel plate. With Ranulf clinging to his back, it was enough to overbalance him. He fell backward like a tree, his arms flailing the air.

Ranulf's breath whooshed out of his lungs as the steel-clad body came down on top of him. For a moment he could only lie face up in the mud, his body half buried.

Weak and nerveless, her muscles turning to jelly with shock, Gillian could not find her weapons. Terrified that the knight would push her aside, rise up and kill her and Ranulf, she screamed for help. Please God! Tears spouted from her eyes. Lancing pains shot through her shoulder

and into her chest. Her leg burned like fire. "Help! Help! Oh, please! . . ."

Ranulf was stirring feebly, but the weight of the downed knight with Gillian perched on his chest was too much for him. He struggled to draw air into his crushed lungs. Then from out of his field of vision another archer with a dagger dispatched the fallen knight.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you!" Gillian cried grasping the hand of Nicholas Warrenby and pressing it to her cheek.

"Steady now, lad. Don't take on so." He pulled his hand away embarrassed. "Just straighten yourself up and step off that Frenchman. He be dead, but your friend be about crushed from the weight of both of you."

With a groan of dismay, Gillian hoisted herself off the breastplate. "Ranulf." She hopped on one foot, afraid to lean her weight on the other. "Ranulf?" She called uncertainly. Desperately, she pulled at the mailed arm at last succeeding in raising the body slightly. "Ranulf, can you slide out from under?"

"Damn you!" He began to curse. Mud was in his mouth and in his eyes. "I must be bruised from head to toe."

Heartened by his complaining and cursing, she pulled doggedly. At last she got the body rolled half over where it stayed balancing precariously. Ranulf braced himself up on his elbows, got a foot free and drove it into the back of the body. At last it rolled all the way over, leaving him free.

Most of his face was black with mud. The part that was still clean was dark with anger. "Damn you! I told you to kill him, not push him over on me. I cannot believe you. Sitting on his chest and crying for help." He grabbed her

arm and shook it.

Suddenly, she began to tremble. "Ranulf, I did the best I could. I lost my sword." She hung her head in shame. She had behaved badly. Ranulf was right. "Please forgive me."

Amazingly, he chuckled. "Where did you lose your sword?"

"Right over there." She pointed.

"Are you badly hurt?"

She thought about that, trying to take a mental inventory of her abused parts. Aside from a burning in her leg and an ache in her shoulder, she seemed to be fine. At last she shook her head. He knelt swiftly before her, ripping the mantle from the helm of the dead knight they had killed together. "Hold still while I tie this tight," he ordered. "'Twill keep the worst of the muck away from it until we can look at it."

"Saint Denis! Saint Denis! To me!" The duke of Alençon had found another horse. Mounting it, he ripped off the visor of his helm and called to the knights of the rear guard who had held back out of the melee. His strong voice carried well above the noise, and the English knights made a concerted effort to reach him. Swinging his sword above his head, he fended them off, then guided his horse between the knots of bodies back toward the second line.

"Saint Denis! To me, you cowards!" But the rear guard, fearing to suffer the fate of the advance, retreated. Tears of fury and frustration streamed from his eyes. The damned English should not have this day. His words the night of the council returned as a vow. The English king must die.

Swinging the sword above his head, Alençon spurred

the destrier for the center of the English line which had already begun to reform. Shouting his challenge, his mouth open, his body leaning far forward in the stirrups, he forced the pain-wracked animal to leap over a grisly clot and made for the unmistakable figure of the king.

The duke of Gloucester, Henry's younger brother was down. Henry straddled him, fighting on foot to protect him until the duke's own retinue could rally to his side.

Alençon flung himself from his horse. A few Frenchmen still on their feet closed in behind him and together they made for the pair. "The king is mine!"

His loud voice carried to the king, who whirled to meet the attack. Parrying the first swing, Henry Lancaster riposted, slipping under the duke's guard, his sword clanging off the armor and staggering the surprised nobleman.

Beneath the Frenchman's feet, blood and muddy water collected in pools. His steel boots slipped from under him and he fell ignominiously onto his back. The king's swordpoint halted an inch from his mouth. The death he had arrogantly planned for Henry terrified him.

Honor forgotten, he raised his hand. "I am the duke of Alençon," he called, "and I yield myself to you."

The king lowered his sword and extended his hand. Like a striking snake the duke's dagger flashed for the throat.

"Ware, Hal!" Humphrey of Gloucester's sword stabbed upward burying itself in the duke's body.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

The French knights lunged forward as Alençon's body fell backward, impelled by Gloucester's stroke. The king's guard closed with them. For the first time that terrible day, the battle was cut and hack in the ancient manner of a hundred years ago.

Although lightly armored with bits and pieces he had managed to acquire from the armorers in the camp, Howard of Rothingham gloried in the challenge. For years he had trained, for years he had yearned. Now the opportunity was here. He fought to defend the king of England. Instinctively, he knew that should they win the day, he would win all. The years rolled back and he was a young squire on his first *chevauchée* in this same country.

With a mighty swing, he dented the shield of a knight in a purple and white surcoat. Staggering back, the man swung wide with his sword striking Hob's shield and

denting it in turn. Evenly matched in skill, neither would give ground. Joyously, Hob absorbed and delivered blows, banging away with fierce enthusiasm. He almost hated to end it, but the Frenchman was lowering his guard. His shield must be tiring his arm.

With a breathless laugh, Hob redoubled his strokes, driving this opponent to his knees with both hands raised to support the shield above his head. With a final mighty blow, Hob drove in underneath. His sword point found the seam between breastplate and skirt. The knight toppled backward, pulling himself free of the sword, and Hob with a last glance of satisfaction turned to find another.

The fighting had begun to thin somewhat, but Hob's experienced eye caught the concerted movement of some eighteen or twenty knights toward the king.

Swinging his sword round his head, he sprang forward with a yell. "Defend the king! To Henry! Saint George! Saint George!"

The king's guards closed ranks with Hob in their center presenting a wall of bodies between the king, who waited until his brother was helped away before dashing up behind them, and the French knights.

"Your Majesty! Stay back!"

The Lion of England pushed his way through to stand shoulder to shoulder with his guard. "I let no man do my fighting. We fight together."

The French knights charged with swords upraised. Their cries of "Saint Denis" mingled with answering challenges of "Saint George." Their youthful voices, muffled behind their visors, sounded like children's.

Gradually, the seasoned men of the king's guard recognized the age and experience of their opponents.

"What?" called one. "Do the French now send boys against us?"

"Boy!" the youthful voice cried. "I will show you—" Ganiot de Bournonville swung wildly, allowing his shield to drop. The guardsman struck him a fearful blow on the side of the neck, caving in the gorget and breaking the young man's shoulder.

"Yield!"

"Never!" Bournonville's voice came in a desperate sob of pain. The weight of the shield buckled around his left arm pulled it down straight. He could no longer defend himself.

Pitying his youth, the Englishmen stepped back.

With a maniacal scream Bournonville flung himself at the king. The wildly swinging sword bounced off the king's helm striking a fleuron from the golden circlet and sending it cartwheeling into the mud. As the king staggered, the guardsman, with a roar of rage, brought down his blade with all the force of both arms. The steel cut through the metal plate and split the body beneath from shoulder to waist.

As it toppled spouting blood, the other guardsmen redoubled their blows, sending some members of the cortege fleeing while others sustained wounds that felled them on the spot.

"Who called the warning?" The king rested panting on his sword. His head rang from the blow he had taken, but otherwise he knew himself to be whole.

"I, milord." Hob limped forward. His light armor had not sustained a blow to his body. The mail hauberk was ripped open above his left thigh. Blood streaked the dangling leather flap.

"You are wounded," Henry observed.



"Not badly, Your Majesty."

The steady hazel eyes inspected the thigh as well as the face of the man. "Our own physician shall attend you. Report to him when you will. What is your name?"

"Ho-Howard of Rothingham," he stammered, tugging the basinet off his head and running a trembling hand through his sweaty locks.

"We do not know the name, but it has a noble sound."

"It is my own, so please you."

"We cannot doubt it." The king straightened wearily. His head was beginning to ache. "Kneel."

His hands cold and his throat dry, Hob dropped down in the mud, his hands clasped over the hilt of his sword.

The king touched the flat of the blade to the shoulder in the time-honored ritual of chivalry. "We dub you Knight. Rise, Sir Howard."

His blood staining the mud under his left knee, Howard staggered to his feet. He could find no words. The dreams of a lifetime achieved in the mud of France. Stunned, his only thought was that he could hardly wait to tell Alys.

"Time to move," Ranulf drawled in Gillian's ear.

A bleak sun had finally broken through for a few minutes at midday, but it had been quickly covered with dark gray clouds. A chilly wind began to blow out of the northwest. The French had deserted the field. Only the great mounds of dead and dying remained. Their moans of pain and cries for help had replaced the fierce shouts of "Mountjoie" and "Saint Denis."

All around Gil the archers were moving out from behind the stakes that had protected them so efficiently from the knights' charge. In only a few places had the

defenses been breached. In most of those places the opening had been closed immediately by the body of the horse that had been ridden onto it.

Ranulf sliced through the leather straps that held the armor on the man he had killed earlier that day. Excitedly, he held aloft a heavy gold chain with a medallion swinging from it. The trophy gleamed dully in the gray afternoon. "What did I tell you? Pull off those gauntlets, Gil, and see what rings he wears."

Curling her lip in distaste, she shook her head. "I think I would rather leave the robbing of the dead to you."

Disgusted, he crossed over and jerked the gauntlets off the stiff fingers. A brilliant gold signet ring intricately molded and set with precious stones caught the light. "No share for you then, milady." He sneered. "Just follow along with me and carry the stuff. Surely you have the stomach for that."

Handing her the ring and the medallion, he squelched through the grayish-pink muck to the nearest mound of fallen. The pile reached higher than their heads and would have measured more than ten feet long. Those who had fallen first had blocked the passage of those that came behind, who in turn had tried to clamber over their bodies. Loving the targets outlined plainly against the sky, the archers had dropped them with deadly accuracy on the hill they sought to climb.

Pulling a gauntlet off an outstretched hand about waist high in the pile, Ranulf began to work the ring off the finger. The hand flexed.

"Ranulf! That man is still alive." Gillian tried to find a place to push at the mound without putting her palms in blood.

"Why so he is," Ranulf agreed unconcernedly, tug-

ging the ring free and handing it to her.

"Help me get him free," she cried. "He may be badly wounded."

"If he is, then he is better off dead. If he is in good condition, he can wait until we get down to him. If he can be held for ransom, some rich knight will get richer. If he can be exchanged, he might live." Ranulf looked around him speculatively as he began to pull at a steel boot hanging over the top of the pile. "I doubt that many will be exchanged though. None of us were captured." He chuckled as the body came sliding down.

Gillian wandered away after a few minutes. The stench of blood, mixed with other things too foul to think about was making her sick. Carefully, she skirted the mounds of dead, trying not to step in the puddles that were too brightly stained.

All the brave young men. Their lives cut short for such a stupid reason. Their bodies lying in mud.

Brian! Her eyes filled with tears. Since the battle began, she had not thought of him. In order to do the job she had been commanded to do, she had closed the personal side of her nature. It had been locked away safe in her brain where it would not be too scarred by what she had been forced to do. Her hands sought the medallion hanging between her breasts where Brian had placed it. How long had they been apart? Forever.

Her eyes swept over the terrible battlefield toward the French lines. No one blocked the Calais road now. Soon. Very soon, she suspected the English army would move on, taking what spoils men like Ranulf could carry. Fer-  
vently she hoped that somewhere out there . . .

But suppose he were here, somewhere around her, lying dead or dying. She had not watched for a knight

caparisoned in blue and gold. She turned and ran back to Ranulf, who had made his way almost to the bottom of the pile. A French knight lay on his side, moaning slightly, his hand pressed beneath his mail skirt in an effort to stop the red flow that puddled sluggishly beneath him. She dropped down beside him. "*Monsieur*," she began haltingly, "*connaissez-vous le Sire Brian de Trenanay?*"

The wounded man groaned and raised his head, staring at her through the eye slits. Again she had the impression that there was nothing human inside the steel cocoon.

"*Le Sire de Trenanay? De la Forêt?*"

The helmed head swung slowly back and forth.

"What are you asking?" Ranulf asked.

"I was asking about Brian, but he does not know him."

Ranulf paused in his pillage. "I had completely forgotten about him. I wonder if he could be around here under some of these." He looked around him.

The field was now busy with the English archers and men-at-arms as they systematically worked over the bodies. Once in a while she would hear a cry as someone slit the throat of a man deemed too badly wounded to survive.

She caught Ranulf's hand. "Please help me look for him," she begged. "If two of us look, we stand a better chance of finding him than one."

He shook his head. "If I come to him, I will promise to save him for you. But this is business. He caused me almost as much trouble as you did, and now you refuse to help me again."

Throwing down his hand, she stormed away. "Ranulf! Rot in hell!" she screamed. Hopelessly, she stared round

her. She would do her best, she promised herself. And all the time she would reassure herself that she was wasting her time, that Brian was not really there but had been held back in reserve and had not fought at all.

As she moved along, she suddenly realized that Ranulf was doing the same thing covering a portion of the field she was not. She straightened and stared at him.

He stared back defiantly. "I was about to get more than I could carry," he snarled. "What was he wearing when you say you saw him the other day?"

"A blue and gold scarf. And he had a blue and gold medallion decorating the breastplate."

Ranulf nodded as he bent over a body half buried in the mud. "I remember." He chuckled. "Something *Mors Cristo!*"

"Yes," she said. "*Mucro Mors Cristo*. Thank you, Ranulf."

"Will you retract your curse now?" he sneered.

"I retract it. May you live long and go straight to heaven."

"I doubt I can handle that." He laughed.

As they bandied words, they moved across the field. Simultaneously, they spied a trail of blue and gold scarf streaming from under a pile of bodies.

Gillian ran toward it, her heart pounding in her throat. The knight whose ring Ranulf had stolen had been alive under the pile, she told herself. But he had been lucky. Many had been crushed by the weight of the bodies on top of them so they could not breathe. "Brian," she gasped. "Brian."

Together she and Ranulf pushed at the mass. It did not move.

"Have to pull them down one at a time," Ranulf

panted as he grabbed for a mail shoulder and sent a corpse sliding off. "Control that heaving stomach and get to it, Gil."

"I will," she sobbed. "Oh! . . ." She jumped back to avoid a falling corpse with an arrow through one of the breathing holes in the faceplate.

At last the upper body of the knight with the blue and gold scarf was exposed. No identifying medallion gleamed from the breastplate. Ranulf turned to go.

"No wait," Gillian begged. "At least help me open the visor."

"But . . ." Ranulf protested.

"Help me." Her fingers trembled as she unbuckled the leather straps. Lifting aside the visor, she sighed, "'Tis he."

"Damn! I cannot believe it." Ranulf helped her push aside the rest of the bodies lying across Brian's arms and legs. "Is he still alive?"

"His lips are blue." She felt the still face. It seemed warm. Holding her fingertips beneath the nostrils, she thought she could feel the slight stirring of breath.

Ranulf knelt beside her, his knowledgeable hands cutting the leather straps that held the breastplate across his chest. "This thing is badly caved in," he muttered almost to himself. "Probably crushed by the pressure from above. I doubt if the Frenchman is alive, Gil."

"I can feel his breath. I know I can," she argued, unable to control her sobs of despair.

Tossing aside the breastplate, Ranulf shook his head as he cut into the mail hauberk. "Unbuckle the gorget from about his throat," he ordered. "Let him breathe."

Tears flowing down her cheeks, she twisted around to find the buckles.

A faint moan and a gasp for breath brought her upright. "Did you hear that? Ranulf, he breathed!"

"He did indeed, little girl. He did indeed." Ranulf smiled at her joy. "I suppose I can go through the rest of the bodies on this pile while you finish reviving him. I might find that gold medallion of his. I would guess it has slipped off somewhere. As I recall it was solid gold. Valuable thing." He continued muttering as he stood up and began to pull aside pieces of armor on corpses.

"Ranulf," she called.

He raised his head, one eyebrow raised in inquiry.

"I love you."

"My God! How dare you?" He turned away and bent hurriedly back to his task.

Tearing the silken scarf that trailed from the top of Brian's helm, she sprang down from the pile and dipped it into a pool of water, less gray than most. Although the water was dirty, at least its coolness might revive him. Gently, she bathed his cheeks.

He groaned again. One gloved hand lifted feebly to knead against his chest as if to tear the pain away. Gently, she laved his cheeks again and touched the moisture to his lips.

He opened his eyes to stare blankly upward at the lowering sky. His mouth opened, gasping like a fish as he sought to draw air into his lungs that had been compressed by more weight than his ribs could bear. He closed his eyes against the pain. Someone was speaking to him. He could feel the stroking of a moist cloth on his face. The pain in his chest and limbs racked him. He wanted to scream, but he could not draw in enough breath to scream. Someone was speaking. It sounded like . . . "Gillian."

"Brian." She was crying. "Brian. Oh, Brian. We found you alive."

"Hurt . . ." He kneaded his chest again. Suddenly, he choked, then coughed. The pain in his bruised ribs made him try to roll over, but he could not move. Gradually he became aware that he lay sprawled on a most uncomfortable mound.

"Can you move your limbs, Brian? Ranulf's here and we can get you up, but we are afraid to move you just yet."

"Ranulf?"

"Here, dear man."

Brian turned his head slightly. His neck was almost too stiff to move. He wondered if his spine were broken. Wondered if he were crushed. He remembered the destrier stumbling over a mailed body impossible to avoid. Then he had been thrown. Something had slammed into his back as he had tried to rise. He had struggled up again, only to be kicked in the chest by a terror-stricken horse. The force of the blow had slammed him down onto a mass of rocks. Then he had lost consciousness.

"Can you move your legs?" Ranulf asked gently, taking one of Brian's steel-capped boots in his hand.

"I—I can barely feel them."

"Can you feel that?" He gave the boot a harsh jerk.

Brian nodded. He got his elbow under him and raised himself slightly. "What am I lying on? My God!" The sight of the bodies beneath him shocked him. His gorge rose, and he flung himself sideways retching painfully. The searing pain of his bruised ribs made him sicker and he could not control himself.

Gillian steadied his shoulders as best she could while



Ranulf unbuckled more of the crushing armor.

At last, when he could relieve his stomach no more, Brian collapsed back against her. "Get me off here," he begged. "Please, Gillian, get me off here."

"Just a minute," Ranulf grunted. "He is too heavy to lift with all this iron on him. I remember what a big fellow he is. So muscular and tall."

"Ranulf," Gillian chided. "He is in pain. I doubt he appreciates your humor."

Ranulf flashed her a quelling look. "It always worked with you," he reminded her. The greaves fell free. "Ready."

Gillian put her arms under Brian's shoulders. The chain mail cut into her wrists. Biting her lip, she lifted with all her might. Brian managed to get his knees doubled and tottered to his feet. With Ranulf on one side and Gil on the other, they brought him down.

Standing swaying, he looked around him. His face, already unnaturally pale, turned gray at the sight.

"Come," Gillian urged. "We must get you back to safety. The French may attack again."

The two pulled his arms over their shoulders and turned him back toward the English lines. Their banners still bravely flew above the field. The rows of stakes still standing in their wedge shapes still marked the archers' lines no one had breached. And between was the carnage.

Sick unto death, Brian lowered his eyes to the ground. Even there the horror of the loss tortured him. His steel boots sank into the mud and sloshed through pools of pinkish-gray water. The blood of France. He said it aloud. "The blood of France."

Gillian was panting beside him as with every step his

weight sagged heavier and heavier on her slender shoulders.

"Why did I live?" he sighed.

Ranulf snorted disgustedly. "I ask myself that when you make stupid dramatic statements like those. You live because of her. Because she dragged me away from my profit-making to search through the bodies for you."

When Brian said nothing, Ranulf cursed mildly. "Can you manage him the rest of the way, Gil?"

She gasped something in reply.

"I take that for yes. *Adieu* until later." He slogged back onto the field.

Behind the stakes, Gillian helped Brian to sit down, then knelt before him to strip off the helmet and push back the chain mail. He raised his head as the chilly wind cooled his overheated scalp. "Feels good," he said at last.

"I love you," she smiled. "You are going to be all right."

Bleakly, he nodded as he stared between the stakes at the French lines now deserted.

## *Chapter Thirty-Eight*

His exhausted face nevertheless radiant, Sir Howard of Rothingham made his way across the field. Despite various nicks and scratches, despite a multitude of bruises, some so deep they would take weeks to fade, his body felt wonderful. Exhilaration pelted through his veins.

He had not thought to fear for Gillian during the course of the afternoon. His conscience smote him as he remembered his neglect. Yet he could have done no differently. She had acquitted herself so nobly in the earlier skirmish that he had firmly believed she would do as well in battle.

As he neared the spot where Nicholas Warrenby's troop had set their stakes, he saw her. Ragged and dirty, her fair hair matted and tangled, she kneeled awkwardly as she cared for someone. Perhaps Ranulf. The swine

deserved killing instead of being carefully tended and waited on hand and foot by a gentle, merciful lady.

"Hob!" Her glad exclamation was punctuated by a wave of her hand.

The man to whom she ministered lay as one dead.

"Gil! Are you all right?"

"Good. A scratch here and there and scared out of the next year of my life."

Hob dropped down beside them. "Sir Brian! . . . Milord? . . ."

Brian did not stir. His long body was still clad in armor from the waist down. Flat on his back he lay, his chest bared as Gillian bathed the myriad cuts from the metal links of his mail. His hazel eyes flickered open, and he smiled slightly in recognition.

"How goes it, milord?"

Brian rallied his strength. "Like my horse had fallen on me. Which he did."

"We found him under a pile of dead," Gillian explained. Her face was grave as she flung away the sodden, soiled scrap of material and pulled the fustian tunic across Brian's chest. "You must not get a chill," she told him.

"Good as new in a few minutes," he murmured. "My ribs feel like they might be bent somewhat but not broken."

"His armor was all caved in," she told Hob worriedly.

"It probably saved his life."

"Yes," Brian agreed.

"We all fared well today," Gillian said thankfully.

"You are not wounded, Hob?"

His face crinkled into a smile. Deliberately, he rose to his full height. "Sir Howard of Rothingham, Lady Gil-

lian," he corrected her, bowing slightly.

Her eyes sparkled with tears of joy. Climbing to her feet, she limped to him to throw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Hob, I mean, Howard . . . I am so happy for you." She planted a delighted kiss on his muddy, unshaven cheek. "Congratulations, Sir Howard."

Brian smiled wanly. "To the victors belong the honors. The day has been a great one for you. Congratulations."

"The French fought gallantly, milord."

"But stupidly, I fear." He shifted, grimacing as if a shaft of pain had racked him.

Gillian dropped down beside him. "Is it bad?" She caught his hand in both of hers.

"No." Their fingers entwined. "No, my love. I winced remembering how I made fun of your little bits of sticks and feathers."

She bowed her head and kissed his hand. His eyes misted with love for her as he brushed her hair with his other hand.

Hob left them without disturbing them further. His obligations to Gillian and to Brian were dissolved. He was his own man with his own lady to see to. Eagerly, he hurried back toward the town of Maisoncelles.

The king had ordered the baggage called from the town and drawn up to the left of the original line. There the sick, the pages, and the sumpters had been sheltered and partially hidden by the trees and underbrush.

A hundred yards from the woods, he heard the noise. A rabble of shouting, cursing peasants were dragging the baggage from the carts. The pages, merely lads, were being knocked aside as they tried futilely to defend the food and supplies. A few sick men had been dragged from the wagons. As he charged forward, Hob saw a knight,

obviously a leader of the rabble drive his sword into the body of one who sought to resist.

"Saint George!" Hob whirled. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted at the top of his lungs. "'Ware robbers! To me! Saint George!" But the lines seven hundred yards away were abandoned. The archers and men-at-arms were occupied with the business of sorting through the battle dead and tending their own wounded. No one paid any attention to him. "Saint George!" he cried again, his throat torn by the effort.

Drawing his sword, Hob broke into a run. The peasants at the very edge of the woods saw him coming. Lightly armored, he moved faster than they expected. With a fierce swing, he chopped one down. The others scattered. Their sticks were no match for the steel of his thrusting sword.

Still shouting for help, he burst into the scene of carnage. The baggage was strewn from the wagons. On the ground as well, lay the bodies of several young pages, their innocent blood staining the grass.

"Alys!" Hob's heart froze. He heard her scream. She ran toward him from behind an overturned wagon. Her arms outstretched, she took two steps into the open.

"Saint Denis!" A mounted knight in full armor galloped between the carts. His sword swinging in a wide whistling arc, he made for the Englishman.

"Hob!" Alys threw herself at him. Her hands almost touched him before the metal chest plate of the destrier struck her. Like a doll flung away by an angry child, her slight body catapulted helplessly through the air to fall crumpled amid the broken chests of a nearby wagon.

"Alys!"

Automatically, he caught the knight's broadsword on

his own. The downward arc had been deflected when the destrier had broken stride. As the man reined the champ- ing warhorse in a circle, Hob stepped back and straight- ened. His chances on the ground with only a sword were slim. The knight's armor was virtually impenetrable coupled with the fact that no mortal wound could be delivered below the waist.

Hob drew his dagger with his left hand. Crouching slightly, eyes blazing, he waited as the knight spurred his mount forward again. The tired horse lumbered forward.

Leaping nimbly aside, Hob dodged the deadly broad- sword and stabbed his dagger into the horse's flank as the animal plunged by. With a shrill neigh it reared and bucked, unseating the rider who tumbled sideways from the saddle. Weapons ready, Hob walked cautiously toward the downed knight who lay stunned.

From behind him came a shout. Another knight charged, his lance couchant. Hob barely had time to turn. His sword only partially deflected the tip before it ripped into his body. The shock plummeted him backward throwing him to the ground. Curiously, he felt nothing at all. He stared upward, puzzled, at the colorless sky before his vision faded completely.

The pain was so great that he could not bear to open his eyes. He could not, dared not move. One side of his chest throbbed with each uneven beat of his heart. Alys . . . Hob opened his eyes.

With a great effort of will he rolled his head to one side. She lay as the knight's destrier had thrown her. One arm flung over her head. Her face was turned away from him. Even from where he lay, he could see her body was twisted unnaturally.

Alys. Tears rolled down his cheeks. With a super-

human effort he rolled over on his side. The pain blinded him for a moment before it subsided. His left side was paralyzed, yet not numb. Every severed nerve sent its excruciating message to his brain.

His good right arm levered him up and hitched him along. His right leg, too, pushed weakly, but its connections were feeble. My lower body is growing numb, he thought. I must be bleeding to death.

He did not look at his body. Instinctively, he knew he could do nothing more for it ever. Instead he glued his eyes on Alys's crumpled body. Tears made it blur as if he looked through a clear pool that rippled only faintly. Someone was moaning. Terrible moans of agony roared in his ears. Someone must be badly hurt, he thought idly.

Alys had not moved. He licked his lips, surprised to find salt on them. "Alys," he whispered. He could not hear his own voice. He licked his lips and tried again. Now there was more salt on them. It must be blood. Not much of a romantic lover with a bloody lip.

He was almost to her. His good right hand touched the fabric of the old gray smock. Gently, he tugged at it. Her body rolled over on its back across his arm.

"Alys?" he begged her softly. "Alys, open your eyes."

Arched over his arm, her chest did not move. He lowered his weary head to her breast listening, hoping despite what he knew to be true.

"Alys . . . love . . ." He hunched himself forward until he could rest his tired body against her own. "Alys . . . came to tell you . . . no longer just plain Hob. Sir H-Howard of Rothingham."

A pressure began to build in his chest. He rested his cheek against her hair. "You will be my lady, Alys . . . my lady. I . . . your knight. Just like in the ballads." His



bloody hand touched her cheek. "Love . . ."

From somewhere he heard the sound of heralding trumpets. "The king . . . gathers his forces. Battle over." He closed his eyes. "Knighted by the king . . ."

News of the attack on the baggage spread through the English lines. Some French knights had led a thieving, murderous sortie of vengeance. At this time when in battle men fought only men, the deliberate slaughter of these innocents was greeted with fierce retaliation. Many of the prisoners were killed on the spot, their heads bashed in by furious Englishmen.

Gillian started up. "Hob must have gone to the baggage to tell Alys," she gasped.

"Help me up," Brian commanded.

"No. You are too weak."

"He was my squire," he reminded her. He laboriously pulled himself to his knees. Grimacing at the pain of expanding his lungs fully, he drew a deep breath and climbed to his feet. He tottered a few steps. "Where is the baggage?"

"In the trees to the left, behind where we were this morning."

"Lead the way."

In the end Gillian found she could move no faster than Brian. Her thigh had stiffened badly. The weight of her wet, muddy clothing exhausted her as did trying to slog through the soft, churned-up field. Each breath Brian drew was a moan, and he walked bent over holding his side like an old man, but he still managed to move.

By the time they arrived, priests and some squires had already begun to move the dead and put the baggage

to rights.

Gillian ran first to the bodies that were laid out side by side. "Not here. Oh, Brian, neither of them is here. Perhaps . . ." Her hand flew to her mouth as she looked where he pointed. "Hob! Alys!"

They lay together as if they were asleep. Except that his whole side from armpit to knee was dyed in shining red.

Gillian ran to them, sinking to her knees at his side. Brian followed and knelt beside Alys. When he lifted her hand, it was already stiff and cold, but he felt for the pulse anyway. Wordlessly he shook his head. Gillian sobbed aloud burying her face in her hands.

At the sound, Hob's eyelids flickered. "M' lady . . ."

Unashamed of her tears, she caught his bloody hand. "Oh, Hob . . ."

His eyes were glazed. "Can't see you. . . ."

"We are here, Hob. We are both here. Brian and me."

"Alys? . . ."

Gillian looked at Brian, who shook his head.

"She is right beside you."

"Ah . . ." His right hand moved feebly patting Alys's shoulder. "Die for my lady . . ."

The tears streamed Gillian's cheeks almost drowning her in her effort to keep from sobbing aloud.

". . . golden spurs . . ." he muttered.

Brian detached a spur from the heel of his boot. "Here, Sir Howard."

Two fingers caressed the chased metal before the hand slipped back limply to lie against Alys's breast.

Side by side they waited as each breath seemed his last. At length he drew a deeper breath. His eyes opened, searching for Gillian. "Tell Harry Bailey . . ." His life

went out as that breath escaped from his body.

Gillian cried out. Brian waited a minute before reaching across to close his eyes.

A squire stood over them, his young face grave. "Is that Hob?" he asked.

"Yes." Gillian whispered softly.

"He was a good man. I thought he was a knight at first."

"He was a knight," Brian informed him, climbing heavily to his feet. "Sir Howard of Rothingham."

The squire nodded. "Thought he might be. He always acted like one. He knew everything about chivalry."

"Can we bury him with his . . . father?" Gillian gasped, trying to suppress the worst of her sobs.

The squire smiled sadly. "You mean Lady Alys?"

Her head shot up. She stared at him intently. "Yes, with Lady Alys." Numbly, she felt Brian take her arm to lead her away.

"Better hide, Frenchman," Ranulf warned Brian. "The English have blood in their eyes. They are killing all the wounded and most of the prisoners."

"He is my prisoner," Gillian said quietly. "No one shall kill him."

Ranulf raised his eyebrow. "Better say he is an Englishman. Someone could run right over you, little fletcher, and bash his brains out while he stood."

"I am a Frenchman—" Brian began stiffly.

"Ranulf may be right," Gillian interrupted. What she had witnessed on the battlefield before they had found Brian had sickened her. The dispatching of badly wounded men had been done with a sort of cold-blooded

mercy. Hot with anger over the deaths of the pages and wounded, what would they do to Brian?

"Believe me, Sir Brian," Ranulf snapped, "I care nothing about you personally. Nor her either for that matter. I just hate to see the time that I spent looking for you go to waste. If you consider how much profit I let slip through my fingers while I was looking for you, you understand my meaning." He hoisted a heavy leathern bag significantly. "Still I managed to collect quite a fortune."

"Robbing the dead," Brian swore fiercely. "What depths will you not sink to?"

Ranulf smiled sweetly. "Never try to tell me or yourself that your French countrymen would not be out there doing the same thing to us if they had won and we had lost. Why do you think the baggage was attacked in the first place? A knight killed your friend Howard. He was a good fighter. Too good for a rabble of peasant scum. A knight killed him. Am I right?"

Brian cursed again. His fists clenched in frustration. "Yes," he ground out.

"I rest my case." Ranulf made a motion as if he dusted his hands. Grinning his devil's grin, he turned to Gillian. "I like the idea of you and him working for me until we get back to England," he gloated, handing her the bag to carry back to their packs.

Brian growled and would have flung himself upon Ranulf to throttle him, had not Gillian stepped between them and soothed him with soft words. "I will see you in hell before I work for you!"

"How interesting! I am sure Warrenby would love to know that one of his best archers is a girl. Likewise I am sure the rest of the men in camp would like a little private

time with her." He smiled at Brian. "You might be able to fight one, but if they also happened to find out that you were a French knight . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

"Brian!" Gillian begged. "We have come so far. Let us do as Ranulf says and get out of this awful place."

"Damned catamite!"

"Sticks and stones!"

Gillian stepped from between them. They were both spoiling for a fight. She was exhausted and thoroughly disgusted with them both. Her leg ached with a fierce throbbing pain. Whenever she thought of Howard of Rothingham and Lady Alys, her throat ached from trying to stifle the tears. Without a backward glance she limped away to find the packs she and Ranulf had carefully stowed before the battle.

Before Ranulf turned away to follow Gillian, he tossed a black jacket to Brian. "Put this on," he commanded. "And take off that metal and throw it away."

"This is an archer's uniform," Brian objected.

"Very clever of you to recognize it," Ranulf sneered. "You hardly got close enough to see them today."

"But I . . ." He swallowed. His hands crushed the cloth, then relaxed.

"Keep the hauberk over your head. Otherwise your haircut might make someone suspicious. Get rid of all the armor. Just toss it out onto the field. Nobody will even notice."

"Why did you do this for me?" Brian wanted to know.

But Ranulf turned away without an answer and hastened after Gillian. Catching up with her as she knelt by the packs, he squatted down beside her to open his and stow the heavy bag of gold ornaments inside. "Stretch out beneath the tree," he commanded, not looking at her.

"What?"

"Lie down. I thought your hearing was good."

Protesting softly, she slid over on her side, staring at him suspiciously.

With practiced hands he caught hold of her leg and began to untie the bandage he had wrapped around it hours before. She lay quiet, too tired to argue as he examined the wound with a touch gentle as a woman's.

From under his jacket he drew a flask. "Good French brandy," he informed her, uncorking it. Ripping the muddy hose away from the wound, he grinned again. "Grit your teeth and keep your mouth shut. My nerves will not stand a howling woman."

With these instructions as preamble, he poured the brandy over the wound. Like liquid fire it burned the raw flesh, cleansing as it did. "Two things good for a wound," he told her. "This is one. Two is let it alone." He took a clean cloth from his pack and wrapped it around her thigh, tying it firmly but not too tightly.

She lay on her side, her head on her crooked arm, staring at him. Her brown eyes were fathomless depths. "Thank you," she said at last.

He grinned. His hand began to stroke the inside of her thigh.

"What are you doing?"

He laughed. "I was touching you as a man should touch a woman. Frankly, I do not see what there is in it."

"Then leave me alone."

He bowed mockingly. "Rest well. You have had a terrible day. She is all yours." He rose as Brian dropped down beside her, a scowl of warning on his face.

The *Non nobis* and *Te Deum* droned from the woods and across the field. King Henry V, mounted on his little gray

horse and followed by a squire leading a magnificent destrier white as the snow, passed along the line of troops. Each man among the English knew the gray palfrey was being honored above all other animals as even the warhorses paid homage to it.

Above the woods on the northwest loomed the round towers of a gray castle. Pausing beside a small knot of prisoners who had been spared because of their exalted rank, he pointed with his steel-gauntleted hand. "What castle is that?"

For a moment no one answered. Then Montjoie, the Principal Herald of France, stepped forward. "The castle of Agincourt, so please Your Majesty."

The king nodded. His voice rose loud enough for the Englishmen in his close proximity to hear and tell the rest. "Then as all battles should bear the name of the fortress nearest to the field on which they are fought, this shall forever be called the Battle of Agincourt."

Bowing obsequiously, the herald stepped back.

## *Chapter Thirty-Nine*

Twenty-three English dead were honored at dusk at the head of the battlefield. Their bodies were placed in a barn located not far behind the original line from which the cry "Advance banners!" had been given. There with a great pile of supplies and armaments taken from the bodies of their French victims they were burned while prayers and hymns followed the smoke and flames into the sky all through the night.

The bodies of the duke of York, King Henry's uncle, who had commanded the line on the right, and of the youthful earl of Suffolk, whose father had died at Harfleur, were preserved to be carried home for burial in England.

The king caused three grave pits to be dug in the field beside the Calais road, each twelve feet wide and twenty-five yards long. Into these pits nearly six thousand bodies



were tipped. A large wooden cross was placed at the head of each. Three days later the army marched into Calais.

"Now is the time to really use that French," Ranulf urged out of the side of his mouth to Brian. "We need a room to stay in. For myself I have been sleeping out in the open so long, I think I am an animal."

Brian looked at Gillian. How long had she been without a bed and a bath? Since she left La Forêt he guessed. Likewise how long since she had eaten a full meal? She was thin to the point of emaciation and caked with mud to her eyes. Poor girl. How he loved her! He made an obscene gesture toward Ranulf. "For you," he sneered, "anything."

The price of a room had tripled at the rat-infested inn on the waterfront. Ranulf cursed stringently when Brian calmly relieved him of a fine gold necklace from the leathern bag. "You could have done better. You were probably too honorable to chaffer for a fair price."

"A room with some hot water for a bath." Brian untied the packs from Gillian's saddle and from his own. "If you think you can do better, please do so. We will stay here tonight and move into your cheaper, more luxurious rooms tomorrow."

The room was poor indeed. The beds were only frames with ropes laced across them and mattresses stuffed with grass. One scuttle of coal was provided to take off the damp chill.

"At least we will not be rained on tonight," Gillian smiled thankfully.

"Even that statement is open to conjecture," Ranulf snarled, glaring at the ceiling.

"Ranulf, if you would like to desert from the army, we will not try to stop you," Brian suggested hopefully. A remarkable change had occurred in him since the day of the battle.

He no longer carried himself so stiffly. No longer did he struggle to maintain a dignified façade. References to chivalry and honor were notably absent from his conversation. Once or twice he had even gone so far as to respond in kind to Ranulf's incessant teasing and tormenting.

"When does the bath arrive?" Gillian wanted to know. She had dropped her pack beside the middle bed and was now stretched out on it. "Oh, lord, this feels good. I have forgotten how to sleep without twisting my body around rocks."

Brian smiled at her. "It even has a sheet and blanket."

"In that case I may try to peel off these clothes. In the places they are not rotted through from the mud they are stuck to my skin."

At a knock, Brian opened the door to admit a servitor bearing a tray with a vessel of wine and three flagons on it. "We will desire the bath as soon as possible." Speaking in his educated French, he slipped a coin into the waiting hand. The man gave a surly nod before withdrawing. "This may be an English port, but the sympathies of many are French," he informed them as he poured three liberal drinks.

He passed each of his companions a flagon and toasted them silently. Together they drank, letting the sharp red liquid run down their throats and spread its balm through their tired bodies.

For a long time no one spoke. Gillian remained on the bed, her flagon perched on her stomach, her feet crossed

at the ankles. Ranulf sprawled across two chairs on one side of the small table. He too held the wine on his stomach staring dolefully into its dark red pool. Brian sat slumped over the other side of the table. His shoulders hunched, his elbows braced. From time to time one or the other would take a sip.

The sounds of roistering soldiers floated up from the streets. Darkness fell and the sounds increased.

When all the wine had been drunk, Ranulf rose and stretched widely, his hands fell to his ribs and he scratched himself. "All this warmth," he complained, "makes a man soft. Those fellows in the street seem to be having a wonderful time. A celebration is what a man needs to drive the ghosts away."

Neither of his companions moved.

He shrugged. "Ah well. I perhaps wasted my breath. One of you has nothing to celebrate and the other is not a man." He strolled to the door. "Never mind the bath. You may take two, young fletcher, one for you and one for me."

Hand on the latch, he paused. "Good night," he smiled sardonically. "Enjoy whatever it is you two do together." With those parting words, he was gone.

Brian raised his eyebrows. "I would not have credited him with so much sensitivity."

Gillian smiled faintly. The wine, the warm room, the bed had all combined to make her more than a bit drunk. "He is a very sensitive person in some ways. He just cannot show it. He knows he is already hated and despised before people get to know him. Therefore, he builds walls around himself and keeps people out by firing volleys of insults at them."

Before Brian could respond, another knock at the door

signaled the arrival of their bath, a small tub with two buckets of water, both barely lukewarm, and a couple of threadbare squares of linen.

"When I get back to York, I shall fix me a bath with water so hot I will scald myself," Gillian promised herself outloud. "I shall hire someone to pour water over and over me until I am clean. And than I shall sit in the hot tub until I am wrinkled like a prune."

Brian grinned at the thought. "Come." He came to the end of the bed and began to unlace her boots. "I may not be able to do much for that dream, but at least you can have one bucket of water poured over you."

She smiled lovingly as he undressed her. Beneath her black jacket, she still wore the stained and faded smock of the lost sailor. She wondered what her own scarlet smock with its fletcher's badge would look like. She had almost forgotten. How long ago had she worn it?

"You will be going home very soon," he reassured her as he lifted her clothing over her head. Then he choked, his control almost broken. Between her breasts hung his gold and blue enamel medallion. His motto, the code by which he had planned to live his life, tore at him unbearably. Agincourt had changed all that. No longer would a man's sword point be death on behalf of Christ. "*Mucro Mors Cristo*" belonged in the grave pits beside the Calais road.

Gillian immediately pressed her cheek to his. "You are still the same man," she whispered, taking his face between her palms and looking into his eyes. "The man who gave me this medallion was alive in the chivalric code. So long as that code lives in you, you may wear this with pride."

Accepting her kiss humbly, he shook his head. "I shall

never wear it again. Truly I am not sure I want to. The sword and the armor were getting very heavy. I was almost glad to put them down."

"Truly?"

"Truly." He kissed her long, letting his love pour into her.

Glorying in it, luxuriating in his care of her, she allowed him to stand her in the small tub and pour in the first bucket of tepid water. "Can you sit?" he chuckled.

"I . . ." She had barely room for her feet, much less her buttocks as well.

"Then we will wash your body first," he laughed, swinging her up and setting her down.

Her feet and legs hung over the rim. She whooped with laughter when he tickled her arch. "I love a ticklish woman." He grinned as he picked up one of the squares of linen, wrung it out, and began to lave her belly and thighs.

"I wish we had a piece of soap," she complained. "I could wash my hair. I can imagine what it looks like by what yours looks like."

Washing her breasts with loving attention that made her squirm, he pinched her nipple. "Mine looks wonderful in comparison to yours," he teased her. "After all, I only slept on the ground three nights. You have slept on it for two weeks."

"My God! I am surprised that you can bear to look at me. I must be hideous beyond belief."

"You are." He dipped the washcloth and began to scrub her face with unnecessary vigor while she struggled and sputtered.

After he had washed her thoroughly, he stood her on her feet and attended to her legs and feet, taking special

care to wash the wound on her thigh. To his relief it seemed to be healing cleanly. Finished, he helped her out and began to dry her too-slender body. She had lost so much weight during the ordeal, that she in truth resembled a gangling youth.

Wherever the towel went, his lips followed, until she was blushing furiously. Tormented by his tongue, she backed away until her buttocks came against the table. "Brian . . ." she whispered.

"What?" His lips were nibbling at her navel before trailing down the center of her flat belly to blow his breath into the downy triangle at its base. Aroused by his ministrations, her body was already beginning to heat.

"Brian . . ."

"Yes?" Swiftly he lifted her onto the edge, before kneeling before her and sliding in between her thighs. He lifted each one so that they rested on his shoulders. With gentle fingers he found the central core of her being and parted the soft blond curls that concealed it.

She moaned ecstatically, calling his name over and over. Her senses were overcharged, tingling, aching for the fulfillment he offered. She had been so long afraid, so long in pain, so long miserable and uncomfortable. His mouth offered her release from all that. She knew it and she wanted it. Never had she thought such craving possible.

Wild with desire, she locked her ankles together and pressed her heels into him to bring him against her. Her fingers sank into his hair and held him while the heat and moisture of his tongue carried her higher and higher.

When her peak came, she began to sob. Great gusty sobs of pleasure followed the release his love had brought her. She had needed him so much. When he had begun,

she had welcomed the physical arousal and fulfillment. Now she experienced the emotional catharsis she had sought instinctively. She was no longer a girl, but a woman who had dealt with life and death.

He left her sobbing on the table, sprawled limply, one hand drooping over the edge. Her legs, too, he left apart, one knee drawn up, the other outstretched, her lower leg and foot swinging limply.

Quickly, he bathed his own body, scrubbing himself thoroughly before using the other bucket of water to rinse. Wet as he was, his skin gleaming, the curling hairs plastered to his body, he came to her.

His hands grasped the underside of her thighs and pulled her toward him again so that her hips rested on the edge of the table. This time he placed her legs around his waist.

Gillian's eyes were still closed; her sobs had subsided to choking gasps.

Brian slapped her lightly on the cheek. "Enough," he commanded, his face serious. "I want you now. Give me everything. Hold back nothing."

She shuddered. "Yes," she whispered, tightening her legs.

He drove hard, burying himself in the warm darkness of her body. As her eager flesh closed around him, he cried out in pleasure. A compulsion arose to drive deeper and deeper, to hide himself in her until somehow he could be reborn, a different person.

In a very real sense he was a different man. The younger son of the Sire de Trenanay had never really lived. The knight of the gold medallion was dead, buried under the weight of the arrow-riddled bodies of his brothers on the field of Agincourt. From the body of this

Englishwoman he would take his new identity. His mother had told him his father was English. Although he would never know him, he would take that knowledge as his talisman and put away the old life forever.

With a cry of dedication, he spilled his seed into her body.

Accepting him with her whole being, aflame with love, Gillian encompassed him with arms and legs. Her mouth pressed against his throat, kissing the strong column where the blood pounded ecstatically. When his hard weight collapsed on her, she felt no pain, only the delicious sense of completeness. They were one flesh, one heart, one mind.

At last Brian stirred. Rotating first one wrist and then the other to ease the strain, he braced himself on his elbows to stare down into Gillian's face. "Did you die?" he asked at last, planting a kiss on the tip of her nose.

She opened her eyes, staring dreamily past his head. Her face was soft with love; her eyes, velvet pools; her slightly parted mouth bore the imprint of his impassioned kisses.

"You look well loved," he observed with satisfaction. He touched one finger to her lower lip. "Is this sore?"

"No . . ." Her answer was a whisper.

He bent and kissed it, taking it between his two lips to caress it lovingly. "It is so red," he told her. "I feared I might have hurt you."

"Oh, no . . ." Again the mesmerized whisper.

He shifted slightly, rubbing their lower bellies together. "Am I too heavy for you?"

This time she merely shook her head and tightened her arms slightly.

He snorted in disbelief. By his own best estimate, he



weighed over fifteen stone. His hand caressed the fragile shoulders, tracing the collarbones where they pushed upward through the nearly translucent skin. As thin as she was she would be lucky to weigh seven. Reluctantly he disengaged her arms from around his neck and pushed himself up.

Protesting wordlessly, she tightened her legs, but he forestalled her by slipping his hands under her buttocks and carrying her to the bed locked to his body. She rested her head on his shoulder.

"This is nice. Can you carry me back to England like this?"

He paused as if considering. "We would get awfully cold."

"Nonsense. I never felt warmer." She twitched her hips suggestively. At the movement, he felt himself tighten within her.

His sharply indrawn breath was music to her ears. Her fingers splayed across his shoulder blades. Their bodies were still locked together as he lowered himself to the bed. "At least, let me hold you for a while." He chuckled as his manhood burgeoned within her.

Stretching out full length on the bed, he let her move at her own pace, blissfully teasing and caressing him until they climaxed together again. His last conscious act was to pull the blanket over their bodies to protect them from the chill of the room.

"I have something to show you," Gillian knelt on the bed beside him, her breasts only a few inches from his eyes as she reached across his body for her pack.

"I am delighted," he observed, raising his head to brush one pendant nipple with his mouth. "Although I have seen it before, it is a sight one does not grow tired of."

Closing her eyes against the sexual thrill, she struggled for control. "I did not mean that."

"Oh?" He transferred his mouth to the other breast, while one hand stole up her thigh to cup her bare buttock. "Then why did you offer them to me so seductively. I can think on nothing else I would rather be shown." His lips drew strongly on the nipple.

"Please stop," she whimpered, writhing above him. "I really need to show you this. I cannot think when you do . . . that?"

He bit the small scrap of impudent flesh, taking pleasure in her tiny cry. "What a prospect!" he laughed. "I shall keep you naked and mindless, a perfect mistress."

"Stop!" she commanded pushing his hands away and jerking herself upright. "Stop that this instant. I have something important to show you."

Grinning a huge mocking grin, he made an elaborate show of lacing his fingers together and putting them behind his head. "Show away!"

Carefully avoiding the trap she had fallen into before, she pulled the blanket tightly around her before getting out of the bed to reach her pack. Bringing it back to the bed, she sat down cross-legged, her body decently covered. Untying the strings, she pulled out the ornately carved casket. Without preamble, she set it on Brian's chest.

"This is for you," she said.

He stared at it puzzled. "A woman's jewel box?"

"Your mother's."

His mouth hardened. One hand flashed down to sweep it away.

Gillian caught it. "No! She gave it to me to give to you."

He turned his head away staring in mutinous anger at the wall.

Gillian placed her hand beneath his chin and brought him back to face her. "Listen! She loved you. These are proof incontrovertible that she loved you more than anything in the world."

"She destroyed my life."

"Perhaps." Gillian shook her head. "Perhaps not. Would you ever have been happy in that decaying rubble?"

"It was Stephen's."

"But he was dead. The responsibility for it was to fall to you. She hated your father. What passed between them is for them alone to know. But she loved you. She arranged for us to get out of that house when the Sire de Trenanay would have killed us."

Brian opened his mouth in horrified protest. "He would not! Why kill you, my innocent friends?"

"To hide his shame. He was mad."

Gillian looked pityingly at him. "You know he was. She did too. She gave me these because she recognized me as your love."

Brian shrugged. "That was nothing. I made no secret of my feelings for you."

"She believed I was a boy," Gillian reminded him gently. "What does that make of you? Of me? Of our obvious love for each other? Ask Ranulf how people feel

about people like him."

Brian shot up. "I have never—"

"But she did not know that you 'never,'" Gillian insisted. "She accepted what she believed to be your sin and loved you anyway. Can you not accept her sin and love her a little bit?"

Brian dropped back, throwing one arm across his face, his fist clenched tightly. His mouth was set in a thin-lipped line of pain.

"Look." Opening the casket Gillian began to draw forth the velvet pouches. "Look, Brian," she insisted. "First is the twenty gold pieces from her dowry."

Slowly, he lowered his hand from his eyes. His face was white and grave.

"Here are the sets of jewels that her father gave her mother. Look. These are what your grandfather gave your grandmother in love and pride. Pearls. Rubies. Jade. Your mother told me that the jade is the rarest of all because it is dark green." She pressed the necklace into Brian's fingers.

He turned it over and over, studying its rich color, its intricate design. "What is in the last pouch?"

Gillian drew her breath. "Her marriage and betrothal rings from Trenanay. She gave it all to me, to give to you if you lived. If you died, then they were for me, because I was your love."

Brian shook his head. "Such things cannot pay for what she took from me."

"She did not expect them to. But they were all she had to give." Gillian's eyes filled with tears. "At least accept them as a gesture. Think of what we know happened to Alys. Think of what her life must have been

like with Trenanay."

"She was his wife."

"She had no choice. Words and gestures are the only weapons that a woman has to fight with. Try to think of her as a brave fighter."

He sighed. "Close the casket and put it back in your pack. Perhaps later I can accept it."

## *Chapter Forty*

The triumphal army knelt on the beach at Dover while the king prayed. To Gillian the sight of the magnificent white cliffs, the feel of the sand beneath her feet, the white clouds scudding across the gray-blue English sky were too much to bear unmoved. Tears flooding down her cheeks, she sank down to gather handfuls of the cold white sand in her fists. To her the feel of England was as precious as gold and rubies. Her prayer was one of deliverance and thanksgiving.

Brian knelt at her side, his white face impassive. He would never see France again. He faced an unknown future among people who were strangers. When he tried to recall the faces of Tobin and Kenneth, they floated in and out of shadows. These were the men he would have to work among. The job he would have to learn was one he had regarded with contempt. But the product he would be

expected to make, he could only treat with respect. He squared his shoulders and prayed for strength.

At Canterbury Cathedral the procession stopped again.

"Blast!" Ranulf complained. "We are never going to get home at this rate. My knees are getting knobby."

Gillian prodded him in the ribs. "Hush!"

"You fought hard," he reminded her, catching her hand. "Why should you and all the rest of us not have the glory? I swear I did not notice God drawing a bow or swinging a sword."

"He sent the rain."

"And almost drowned us in the process. It did not rain only on the French side of the field."

As their horses clattered into the inn yard of the Tabard, Gillian could not help smiling. Harry Bailey had outdone himself. A painting on cloth hung over the sign. Its subject was clearly King Henry V riding, triumphant, through a field of prone Frenchmen. Around the edge of the picture were painted the words to the newly composed tune of the day:

Then went oure Kynge, with alle his oste,  
Thorowe Fraunce for all the French boste;  
In Agincourt felde he faught manly;  
He had both the felde, and the victory.

"I wonder if he has King Henry's Chambers ready?" Gillian laughed.

Brian grinned. "Undoubtedly. And the king shall stay the night whether he knows it or not."

Ranulf hesitated as they dismounted. "Perhaps 'tis time for me to move on. I have been long from Briarthwaite. Those scurvy villeins that I left in charge have

probably robbed me blind."

Brian made no comment but stood with arms folded regarding him coldly. He neither liked nor trusted Ranulf.

But Gillian extended her hand. "Nonsense. 'Tis drawing on toward evening. Stay the night and continue in the morning."

Ranulf took her hand hesitantly. "I think I would cast a shadow on the festivities."

Gillian shook her head. "You are a returning hero." She grinned. "Besides Harry Bailey would never forgive us if you did not part with some of your gold at his establishment."

His mouth curved in a sardonic smile, Ranulf swung down. "I almost forgot." He cast a significant glance at Brian. "A man's worth and desirability are always judged by the weight of his purse."

Harry sat behind the desk, as was his wont. At the sight of them he threw up his hands in thanksgiving. "Sir Brian. Praise God you found the lady safe. Welcome, gentles all." Swiftly, he rose and came round the desk to greet them, shaking the hand of each in turn. "I do not know you, sir."

"I am Ranulf of Briarthwaite," was the stiff reply.

"Welcome! Welcome to the Tabard Inn. We have beds and food for all." He looked expectantly toward the open door through which they had come.

Gillian laid her hand on his arm. "Sir Howard of Rothingham is dead, Harry."

His watery blue eyes suddenly filled. Compressing his lips between his teeth, he turned away. In the silence of the lobby his sharply indrawn breath betrayed his grief. After a moment he turned back. His face was calm, but



very red. "Sir Howard, you said?"

"Knighted by the king's own hand at Agincourt," Brian supplied heartily.

Harry swallowed hard, wiping his hand hastily across his eyes. "Why then he died happy as a man could," he said at last.

"He spoke of you at the end," Gillian said. "He wanted you to know."

"Always a good lad," the host agreed. "We shall speak later of this, my lady Gillian. For now the best beds and the best wine for my friends."

That night over a sumptuous table the story of Agincourt was told and retold. Gillian thought she had never tasted such delicious food, even given the circumstance that she was half starved and had been eating little fit for human consumption in almost a month. Harry kept the wine flowing freely, until all three of his guests slumped happily in their chairs.

Gillian yawned widely, her eyelids drooping. "My compliments to the host." She smiled. "I believe I will retire. The thought of your excellent bed in . . . er . . . The King's Chambers tempts me more than the excellent wine."

Brian rose only a trifle unsteadily. "I shall escort my lady to her chamber," he declared. He presented his arm with a courtly bow.

"'Tis unnecessary, Brian," Gillian replied cheerfully. "I think I would really like to go alone tonight. You have good wine and good friends. Please stay and enjoy yourself."

Brian hung his head in sorrow. "She loves me not," he

confided half-seriously to Ranulf.

The master of Briarthwaite smiled. "Oh, I think she loves you very well. She is tired." He rose also, bowing slightly. "I give you good night, Gil."

Her brilliant smile encompassed the room. Brian blinked. In clean garments, her hair a soft cloud around her face, her cheeks flushed from the wine, Gillian was very close to beautiful. "Good night, Ranulf. Harry. Brian."

"She left us," Brian noted, his voice faintly surprised.

Ranulf dropped back into his chair, reaching as he did for the wine. "You take her too much for granted. Because she has played a man's part for so long, you forget that she has less strength than you."

Brian scowled at the smaller man. "Are you taking it upon yourself to instruct me in how I should treat a woman?" he asked in amazement.

Ranulf grinned a self-mocking grin. "Seems incredible, I grant you. I of all people."

"She is a very special lady," Harry Bailey noted. "I have been an innkeeper for over twenty years. To my knowledge I never met another one like her."

Brian listened to them resentfully. "She does very well," he said at last.

Ranulf's dark eyes hardened. His mouth curled in a sneer. "She saved your skin at least twice that I know of. Did you ever so much as thank her?"

Brian opened his mouth.

Ranulf held up his hand. "No, hear me. To my eternal shame she suffered agonies because of me. She stared death in the face on that battlefield and never flinched. She starved, froze, and almost drowned, but she never complained. She behaved like a soldier when men in

front of her were diving for cover. If you mistreat her and take advantage of her love . . .”

Brian interrupted. “I have no intention of mistreating her. I love her. I simply feel that she may be wrong to be living such an unnatural life.”

Ranulf spat a rude name.

“Gentlemen . . .” Harry interceded softly.

“You know nothing about unnatural. Perhaps she is living the most natural life of all. Do you really want to know why I cannot get interested in women? Because they are so damn stupid. How many of them do you know who have anything at all to offer a man except the bed-chamber? They are reared to be so ignorant that most can barely converse, so weak that many do not survive the first year of marriage. Whether you acknowledge it or not, Sir Brian, the things you love in Gillian are the things you want her to give up.”

“She will not give them up,” Brian gritted out. “I asked her to when I asked her to marry me the first time. She refused. I wanted to leave her then, but I could not.”

“Then you must take her and love her for the rare jewel that she is.” Ranulf spread his hands. “I think that if you do not, you will be a most unhappy man, not to say stupid.”

Brian regarded the two somberly. Ranulf’s dark eyes and Harry’s light blue ones were calculating his worth. He felt extremely uncomfortable as he hid his face in his wine cup.

The master of Briarthwaite rose before the sun the next morning. Calling for his horse, he thought to settle the account with the host and ride away before the others

were stirring.

"Ranulf."

He winced at the sound of her voice. He had especially hoped to ride away without sentimental good-byes. Assuming a faintly bored expression, he turned to see her coming down the stairs.

"Will you join me for breakfast?" she invited him.

He hesitated. "I must be away," he muttered.

"Just some fresh hot bread and ale." She held out her hand. "Please."

Heaving a sigh of resignation, he capitulated. "Lead the way."

They sat facing each other while a boy brought the bread with fresh churned butter and some dried fruit drenched in honey.

"I must away as soon as can be." He took a bite, concentrating on his food and not looking at her.

"I know."

His dark eyes flicked upward then dropped. "I have been a long time away from my lands. I shall probably have to fight my reeve for my rents."

She took a sip of ale. "I doubt not you will win handily."

He nodded. "I had not planned to get so much experience in fighting when I left Briarthwaite. The whole thing rather got out of hand."

She grinned. "Certainly for me. I was just delivering the king's commission."

Suddenly, his face twisted. He drew in a shuddering breath. "Gil Fletcher. Damn you!" His voice was a snarl. "How does one apologize for all the wrongs I have done you? What do I say?" He clenched his fists in agonized frustration.

She smiled. "Let us begin here. I am Gil Fletcher from York. So pleased to meet you Ranulf of Briarthwaite." She extended her hand across the table. "Now there is nothing to apologize for. We just met today."

He took the hand she offered but shook his head. "Too easy. When you do that, you wipe away all the good things too. No. I have to live with my sins, black and damnable as they are."

She changed the subject. "I suppose that Brian and I will leave today too. We will journey much more slowly than you would wish to travel. The oxen, you know. Still we must make all haste. I do not know what I shall find when I return to my shop."

He drained his ale and rose, tossing several coins on the table to pay for both their breakfasts. "Then fare you well."

She rose also, her face sad and still. "Fare you well, Ranulf."

He extended his hand, not to shake in parting, but to lead her out of the common room and into the hall. The entryway was still dark.

"I have a mind to try a short experiment," he said softly.

She threw him a quick look. Was he teasing again?

He pulled her up against him with a twist of his arm. The other arm he closed round her waist. His dark eyes searched her face carefully for some sign of revulsion. Finding only acceptance, he touched his lips to hers.

It was a brother's kiss, Gillian remembered later. When it might have become something more, he shivered slightly and stepped back, his face unreadable. "Fare you well," he repeated.

She smiled. "If you are ever in York, you have a

friend. Remember friends are rare and hard to find."

He set his cap on his head. "I will remember." He walked toward the door. His slight spare figure paused silhouetted in the light. "Gillian, are you sure you are not a boy disguised as a girl disguised as a boy?" He did not wait for her answering chuckle.

"I think I may take a pilgrimage to Canterbury for the soul of my good friend," Harry told them as they bid him good-bye. "I met him on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, you know. Him and his good father over twenty years ago."

Brian nodded soberly. "I believe that in his ending, he redeemed all. Yet no man can have too many friends to pray his soul from Purgatory."

Gillian smiled painfully. "We will light candles in the great cathedral in York. Certainly so many will speed his journey."

As the oxen pulled out of the inn yard, she looked back over her shoulder. Her last glimpse of Harry was as he raised the corner of his apron to his face.

The inner court of her home had never looked so dear. Springing down from the wagon seat, Gillian flung open the door. Everything was just as she remembered. "Kenneth! Uncle Tobin!" she shouted.

From the back of the house, the cook answered. "Master Gil! Praise be to God. Master Kenneth be in the shop. Master Walton he be with him. How be ye, Master Gil. We feared for ye being gone so long."

"Fine. I am fine." Gillian dashed from the house and across the court to the shops. "Kenneth."

"Gil." Kenneth's voice was shrill with delight. "Oh, Gil." Her younger brother flung himself into her arms. "What happened to you?"

"So many things that you would not believe. I have been to France."

"No! Uncle Tobin. Did you hear that? Gil has been to France."

Keeping her arm tightly around her brother, she made her way into the bowyer's shop. Tobin Walton seemed shriveled. The arm and leg on his left side maintained a horrible stillness, while the rest of his body strained forward to see her.

"Gil." His eyes filled with tears. His dear familiar voice was hoarse with emotion. "I feared you dead or worse."

"Uncle Tobin . . ." She knelt beside him, throwing her arms around him while he held her close. "Oh, Uncle Tobin. How are you?"

"Good. Excellent. Now that you are returned, I am wonderful. You will be fletcher and Kenneth will be bowyer." The old man's face, sadly drawn down on the left, glowed with excitement.

"Yes," Gillian agreed, hugging them both. "We shall be as we were before, except more."

"More?"

She kissed Uncle Tobin on both cheeks. When she would have done the same to Kenneth, he drew back. "Stop kissing me. I knew you would come home safely. I told everybody. Did you bring me a present?"

She thought about his request. "Well, I brought you an archer's jacket and cap."

He looked at her suspiciously. "Where did you get them?"

"They were mine, but I give them to you." With

pleasure, she thought. "They are the real thing worn by King Henry's archers."

Kenneth still looked skeptical.

"Ask Brian." Eagerly, she drew him into the room from where he had waited, his large frame filling the doorway.

"Gil fought with the king's army at Agincourt," Brian told him in answer to his doubting look.

Tobin Walton bent a hostile eye on the knight. "I thought we had seen the last of you," he growled.

Brian shook his head. "Never, sir. Gil has accepted my proposal of marriage."

Tobin's face turned dark red in anger. He turned to Gil. "Will you give up everything?" he snarled.

Gil started to protest, but Brian raised his hand. "Believe me, Master Walton, she will give up nothing. We will be married in secret. I will apprentice myself to Gil Fletcher and learn the trade."

"Sir Brian de Trenanay, Fletcher?" Tobin snorted. "Not likely."

"No. Master Brian Forest, Fletcher."

Tobin stared from man to woman. Her face was serenely happy; his, serious but resolved. "Why?" he said at last.

Brian laughed dryly. "Oh, many reasons." He took her hand. "Not the least of which is that she took me prisoner. I have to work to pay my ransom."

"In bondage for the rest of your life," Gillian agreed happily.

After supper that night, they retired to her room. On her own bed, spread with sheets scented with lavender and costmary, he made long and leisurely love to her. Then when she had cried a little for pure happiness, they



both lay breathless, their bodies warm and satisfied.

Gillian spoke dreamily. "What a wonderful prospect"—she sighed—"you beside me in this bed every night for the rest of our lives."

Beside her, Brian brushed a wisp of hair back from her temple and blew in her ear. "Yes, and in the mornings, too."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten the mornings."

"We could take long naps in the afternoons."

She giggled. "Uncle Tobin will be furious. We will never get the commissions done on time."

Brian rose on one elbow. "I will work hard, Gillian. This I swear to you. You gave me my life twice over. I can never repay you."

She frowned. "Do you talk of payment?"

"No." His voice was low and serious. "Never. I said I could never repay you. It is hard for me to explain."

She waited in the darkness. Brian had talked little on the return journey. Except for the most commonplace observations about the scenery and the weather, he had remained silent, only reassuring her of his feeling with his affection and passion. Each night he had made love to her with studied care, bringing her to pleasure again and again before holding her secure in his arms until she fell asleep. He almost seemed to be demonstrating how he would behave toward her.

"You owe me no explanation," she said as the silence lengthened.

"I think I do," he replied. "You need to know what to expect." He pulled away and sat up in the bed. The moon cast its brightness through the panes, making pale patterns of light on the floor.

"When I threw away the last of my armor, I felt relieved," he whispered. "I had wanted to die. In a sense I think I did die. I was unconscious a long time. And when I awoke, all around me were dead knights. We had all died." He shuddered at the memory.

She sat up and put her arms about him, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Think not on it."

"I must say it. Then I will be free. You and Rānulf woke me. Do you see?"

She waited, puzzled.

"You and Rānulf. You represent the new world. He was a knight who had sense enough to see knighthood for what it was. You were an archer whose weapons spelled the end of knighthood for all time. You had both taken the trouble to come and seek me out. To dig me up, if you will."

"Brian, I love you. I came to seek you out for that reason only."

He turned and took her into his arms, caressing her cheek and kissing her forehead. "I know. But I belong to you now. I belong to your world. And I shall hold hard by the life you gave me."

"What if you find you dislike fletching?" she asked seriously. "Kenneth cannot manage it. He says his fingers fumble over the feathers."

"Then I shall be a bowyer, or an armorer, or a carter, or who knows what. But I shall earn money as you do and love you and honor you every day." He kissed her tenderly.

She thought her heart would burst from loving him so much. Lifting her hands to his hair, she held him to her in a long, long kiss.

"We can have a wonderful life," she assured him.

"I know. I have only one request." He squeezed her suggestively.

"Name it."

"Be a woman for me occasionally."

With a small feminine sigh she lifted her breasts to his kiss. "I shall be a woman for you every night. . . ."